

Book I - Minataur Tails

of

Minataur Tails

The Second Book

in the

Dragon Bound

a.k.a Dra@g©n B©und a.k.a

a.k.a **The D-B©und Adventuring Series** a.k.a

starring

Ruby FireHaven

and so on and so forth

as conceived, written, and enchanted by

Celli

the

Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

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and in the Earthen Vortex

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Commemorative Internet Edition

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Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

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Minataur Tails
Book I - Minataur Tails
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Full First Book
Please ignore anything to the contrary.

*I am pleased to present
for your general edification and amusement
the first chapter of
Celli the Happy Go Lucky's
award winning
Minataur Tails*

Appendix A - The Ranting

What some (including me) consider to be one of the greatest chapters in all of literature. So much so that it's sort of dangerous for me to read this particular chapter, because invariably after I do, I have an insatiable desire to continue and read the rest of the book... and we all know what a time killer that can be. But then, truthfully and in all honesty, that's a compulsion I hope you'll soon come to share. And in the end, what this posting is all about. So, after you're done (and if you're in the industry), please feel free to request the rest of the manuscript. You won't be disappointed.

Minataur Tails
Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod
Appendix A
The Ranting

Minne was a Minataur. It wasn't an original name, but by some quirk of fantasy literature it was a rule that a character's name had to start with the same letter as the type of creature he, she, or it was. As such, Minne's brothers were Marlin, Mark, Monty, Mike, Mickey, and so forth. He came from a large herd. But Minne knew his name was the best and so did the author, the award winning author of the much beloved Dragon Bound series, Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod.

Since Minne was the best possible name there was for a Minataur character, Celli was sure the name had already been used countless times before. He'd even done a cursory name search at his local library. And sure enough, Minne the Minataur had already been involved in a whole series of adventures. He was well represented in the Alphabet Book of Mythical Creatures squeezed in between Oliver the Orphan Orc and Paul the Persnickety Pegasus. OK, sue us. Neither Celli nor Minne were very good with words or things alphabetical. The point is Minne was an obvious name for a Minataur, so obvious that his mother (Mary) and father (Marvin) had hit upon it right away. It was the type of name that easily bespoke of his coming fame, rip roaring adventures, and growing fan base. It was the type of name that would be ludicrous to protect with vain attempts at legalese.

No, Minne the Minataur^{©™}(Patent Pending) was a good name. It did not matter that Minne the Minataur^{©™}(Patent Pending) had been previously used by Arthur Dumcraven in his best selling epic trilogy Minne the Minataur Adventures or that before that Ernest Tiltensbark had crafted his seventeen book children's book franchise around a similar named creature, Min'ne the Minataur. What mattered was that Min'n'e the Min'at'a'ur was first used as an example in a third century epic poem entitled Copyright Legal Defenses -- Avoiding the Pitfalls: Using the ' to your Advantage. H'o'm'b'e'r had believed in the ' and that epic poems should have names of epic length.

Some felt Minne could have had a better name. There was a conflicting school of thought in fantasy writing, which held that every name of any character no matter how small, tiny, or insignificant their role should have a memorable name. A name like Art'gun'haven 'Cra da La Doo'n. However, the disadvantage of such a ridiculously long winded name will immediately become obvious if one ever tries to read The Adventures of Art'gun'haven 'Cra da La Doo'n & Art'gan'huven 'Cro do La Daa'n. Never mind that you, dear reader, will never be able to tell the two title characters apart, neither could the rest of the cast. But even that is not the best example of this particular pitfall. It seems that somewhere between the first and second book in The Lithal'tr'n Chronicles, the Faire Damsel Marla forget that the name of her true love was Blah-Blah Met'e, and so spends the rest of the Chronicles (all six books, plus the short story collection) tending the, um, "gardens" of Met'e's arch nemesis Ma'ta.

No dear reader, trust me. As romantic as Art'gun'haven 'Cra da La Doo'n sounds, you probably will never read it all the way through more than once, and I personally am willing to guarantee that you will never say it correctly. Much is made of little know facts in fantasy literature. And this I will tell you outright, there is no fact more little known, obscure, or patently worthless than the knowledge that among the hoofed creatures (Minataurs and Centaurs especially) that an apostrophe in a name denotes a missing letter. So try as you might, you'd never be able to guess whether Art's true name is Art'e'gun (yada-yada) or Art'le'gun (etc.). And let's face it, as long as we're being honest, isn't Art a better name for an Ant, an Aardvark, or an Anterior Armored Anthropoid anyway? Art the Anterior Armored Anthropoid -- it has a certain ring to it, don't you think?

So let it go. Minne was a Minataur and should I ever start calling him Min'ne, you will know it's solely on the advice of my lawyers.

This, of course, is all just a long way of saying Min'ne was a Minataur and that this book will be about Min'ne. But I suppose

calling the book Minataur Tails pretty much gave the game away in the first place. So really, let's not belabor the point here any further.

Minne was -- if you'll be so kind as to let me repeat myself -- a Minataur. What does this Minataur look like you may ask? And believe me you will ask. I cannot begin to tell you how much fan mail I get. Everyday the mailman brings yet another bag, I read every letter, which is to say I open every envelope and check for small bills and checks, but hey I'm a writer not a reader, so if you want someone to read your letters...

The thing is Crazy George has been staying at my house for a while. He says he needs a break. His new wife is a real demon; but then, he knew that going in, so I'm not really sympathetic. The point is, if I seem a bit distracted, that's why. That and the K'fr. But we'll get to all this in a bit. It's a long story. One hundred thousand words, to the letter, but this isn't one of those Garg novels. First off, a Garg novel is only 75,000 words. I on the other hand provide a full 100,000 words. It's like getting 33.3% more for free -- in much the same way that a Quadrillogy packs a third more action than some stupid overrated trilogy. Hey! Come to think of it, I'm going to have to talk to my publisher and see if we can't put that on the cover.

But more important than all that, what I'm saying here is that you can be patient. I'm going to tell you the entire story, because unlike a Garg novel, the book isn't just going to end at exactly 75,000 words. Garg isn't going to be walking down the streets of Rigor Pass and suddenly fall into quicksand. I don't even want to go into what's wrong with that. He's not from this vortex in the first place; and let's be honest, Garg is more of a D©©m Crag Mountain type guy. But even if we are willing to accept that Garg was in Rigor Pass because that's where the mysterious letter came from, I just don't buy that he fell into quicksand. The point isn't that it's called cement in the story. The point is that it happens at exactly 75,000 words. You be the judge.

Garg was disoriented in the large metropolis. His keen hunting instincts overpowered by the myriad sights, sounds, and smells. It had taken him longer than he had expected to trace the mysterious stranger to the building he now stood in front of.

Garg, also, felt naked without his club. This might explain why he did not see the orange construction cones, the flashing barricades, or the shouts from the construction crew. One momentary little misstep and Garg found himself sinking down into a pool of cement. Quicksand, he thought. He should have known better.

Will Garg escape the dangers of the quicksand cement?

Will the mysterious stranger once again escape Garg's grasp?

And what will happen to Laura, who he left in the department store dressing room?

Find out in the next exciting installment of GARG!, available at better retailers everywhere.

In case you're wondering, the answers are Yes, Yes, and Laura will go to the shoe department and won't even notice Garg is missing for the first three chapters of the next book.

The point is (and there is a point and that's) that you will get the full 100,000 words from me, maybe even a 1,000 more if that's what it takes... or my editor tells me I need to fluff it up a bit. Maybe he said something like:

Get with the Program.

You're a thousand words short. Fluff it up somewhere.

Your Editor

And maybe I decided the thing to do was add a chapter at the beginning of this here book (where nobody would notice), and just sort of tie it in seamlessly as I ranted on mindlessly, complaining about the Garg novels (in particular) and other hack literature (in general).

The previous sentence aside, it is not my intent to delve any deeper into my personal dissatisfaction with the linear narrative structure of the Garg novels. The point is, was, and ever shall be that after I sift the mail for money, checks, and similar valuables, I occasionally read a letter or two. Usually they go (ahem, hint, hint, hint) like this:

Dear Esteemed Author,

You are great. No. Great isn't the right word. You are fantastic, wonderful, and superb. I just wanted to write a quick letter to let you know what a great, fantastic, wonderful, superb job you are doing. I hear you have been nominated for the N© Bell Peace Prize for your work in ridding sword and sorcery novels of swords.

I applaud your efforts. But do you think this turn of events will affect the value of my weapons replica collection?

Ha, Ha. You can use that joke if you want to.

Anyway, enclosed is a crisp new hundred gold note I had lying around. It's just my little way of saying good work.

Sincerely,

Your Money Sending Fan

I value correspondence with my readers, especially the ones who send cash, so I wrote back.

Dear Money Sending Fan,

I fear the value of your collection will be greatly reduced. Please keep in mind that I am not a licensed Movie

Paraphernalia Collection Adviser, so you may want to seek the counsel of an appropriate professional, but yes the value of any non-Grt, Ruby, Crazy George, or other Dragon Bound collectable is sure to plummet.

Sell the swords. Buy genuine Dragon Pendants™. They double as digital watches. And their value is sure to explode.

Thank you,
The Worlds Greatest Author

At other times, the correspondence goes something more like this:

Dear Esteemed Author,

Wow! What a novel. Great, fantastic, superb, and excellent are just a few of the adjectives that come to mind. I do have some questions though.

- 1) On page 56 where Ruby does (some mind-numbingly obscure reference that no one in their right mind could possible care about), wouldn't it have made more sense if she had done (a well thought out solution that points out numerous holes in some book I may have had something to do with and hence will not be repeating here)?
- 2) The same thing happens on page 61, 63, 89, and 101. Is this deliberate?
- 3) I can't locate the Garg novels anywhere. Do you have the publisher's address?

I have included three crisp hundred gold notes for your time and effort in answering these questions. When will the next novel come out?

Sincerely,
Another One of Your Money Sending Fans

To which I replied:

Dear Another One of My Money Sending Fans,
I am impressed by your grasp of the subtleties of my books. I am honored that you would spend so much time digging deeper into their true meaning.

The answers to your questions are:

1) Yes

2) Yes

3) Yes

And soon, just as soon as I add those last few thousand words that my editor wants.

Thank you,

The World's Greatest Author

Now, I published the first two letters just so you would get an idea of what my usual fan mail looks like. The next few letter writers didn't send any money, and so didn't get a personalized reply that they could have sold on Manna-Bay for untold gobs of gold. Their loss.

Yo!

Why you no describe what Goblin look like?

Garry the Goblin

Hey!

What dat Orc look like?

Orin the Orc

Don't you read my Comments!

You need to describe your creatures better.

What the heck does a Gnome look like?

What's the difference between a Troll and an Ogre?

What exactly is a Depth Fiend?

And if I wanted to pick up a hot Elvin chick, would I be better off going to the Dungeon Edge Café or Lucky's Tavern?

Your Editor!

These are exactly the type of letters I don't respond to, but I seem to get so many of them -- especially from that editor guy -- that I thought it might be a good idea to just briefly go over what the different creatures look like.

Ready?

OK.

Minne looks exactly like a Minataur. Let me say it slower. Maybe it will help. He looks exactly like a Min-a-aur.

Just kidding. I can just see my editor pulling his hair out over that one. Look, you want to know what Minne looks like, right? Well, look on the front cover. Right there in full color glossy oil or whatever they use in your dimension should be a picture of Minne by some famous and talented artist. And that's what a Minataur looks like. Duh!

But just in case you're the artist and don't know what to paint, let me help you out. Minne has the body of a man and the head of a bull. He stands over seven feet tall, and tends to wear cowboy boots, blue jeans, and plaidish shirts.

Sadly, that's where the easy description ends, because sometimes Minne has horns, and sometimes he doesn't. That's because, he can change what his face looks like at will. So, you could say that he had big horns, a grizzly beard, and eyes full of hate and you'd be right, or you could say that he had the face of a two month old calf, all sweet, soft, and tender and you'd also be right. That face changing ability is about it for Minne's magical powers. Well, that and his ability to track through the vortexes. But how to explain that last? Oh, here. Suppose Minne wanted to go from, um, say, just off the top of my head, from Rigor Pass to

the Realms of Chaos. Well he could do that by way of M©ther G©©se Land or any other vortex he wants to visit on the way.

Gee. That's not a very good description of vortex tracking, is it?

Look, just trust me on this. I'm not saying it will get any clearer, but if things start to get weird around Minne (the scenery changes, the plot goes to H\$rlk in a hand basket, or something like that) just assume Minne is vortex hopping and you'll be in pretty good shape.

So are we all OK with Minne, then? We all know what he looks like? And that he's rude, self serving, and of royal blood, which isn't so much a magical ability, but something useful and central to the storyline in it's own right. Oh, and I guess while I'm at it, I should say that the ladies tend to go for Minne in a love to hate him, hate to love him sort of way.

And there's Minne.

Believe it or not, if I didn't have to respond to the editor's other inquiries, we could get on with the story. It's a good story full of twists, turns, and K'fr dealing Minataur's; but for reasons of suspense, I will not elaborate at this point on exactly which Minataur in the story will be smuggling K'fr in his saddle bags because he has diplomatic immunity on account of his having royal blood in his veins, but for the love of Gra'gl, I'm hoping you can figure it out on your own.

But like I said, before we get to that, first I have to respond to the editor and let you know what a Troll looks like.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so if you want to know what a Troll looks like, turn on the TV.

-- Click --

See there you are. No, that's not a troll. That's Jeannette Stevens, the award winning anchor for the Mt. D©©m News. She has her own news program now, The Jeannette Stevens Weekly Report. She's everything Dark Portent could ever possibly want in

an Elf and more. She's blond, beautiful, career minded, and incredibly smart. Don't ask me how she got mixed up with Minne.

-- Click --

No. Those aren't Trolls either. This is the Bash Toe Horde. I love this episode. Mom and Dad go to a Separatist Rally and while they're out, Grug throws his spear in the house and breaks a vase.

"Mom always said, don't throw spears in the house."

What? You've never heard of the Bash Toe Horde? You know, personally, I hate it when an author writes some stupid song or poem and then inserts it into his story -- usually on some ultra-weak pretext. In fact, I usually just skip over them. So if you don't care for song parodies, feel free to ignore this bit. Also, I've got to apologize, I'm coming down with a bit of a cold, and so my voice is a little hoarse. Anyway, here it goes:

The Bash Toe Horde. The Bash Toe Horde.

It's the story of an Orcin Lady
Who was bringing up three very horrid girls
All of them had wiry hair like their mother
The youngest one in barbs

Da-na-da-da

It's the story of a Goblin called Bash Toe
Who was bringing up three very lovely cubs
They were four warriors living all together
Yet they were all alone

It goes on, but you get the point. Who would have thought mixed species marriages would have made it onto primetime TV, and a Goblin/Orc marriage at that? Good thing they never had any joint offspring! Makes me shudder just to think about it.

But, enough of that.

-- Click --

Here we go: This Ole' Lair. See Handy in the hard hat, he's a Troll. Ever looking for somebody to get some real work done, you'll be looking for a Troll. That guy in the white shirt standing next to him is an Ogre -- bigger, dumber, and not as helpful. And all the guys on the site that the camera never quite focuses on, those guys are Gnomes.

-- Click-Off --

So I hope that settles it. In just a couple pages when the story starts and I introduce Jeannette into the plot line, I don't want to get any letters complaining about how I didn't describe her. She's a major TV personality. Flick on the tube. Take an interest.

Dear Esteemed Noble Author,

You are my personal Hero. I live to be like you in every possible way. As such, I don't own a TV.

Enclosed is a small stack of gold coins to express my gratitude. What does a Gnome look like?

Sincerely,

Your Very Rich Fan

OK. If you're going to put it that way, I can be more helpful. You know that hot chick that you want to date, but can't work up the nerve to ask out? Odds are she's an Elf. That football player that isn't so smart? If he's on the first string he's an Ogre, if he's on the second string he's a Troll, and if he's the water boy, he's a Gnome.

Come on, explore your world. That guy behind the Manna King counter is a Gnome. But the guy wearing the manager's shirt is a harder call. He could be anything. The guy who took your money when you bought this book? He's definitely a Gnome, unless of course he's an Elf slumming it, or an uppity Orc, or a Goblin with literary pretensions.

Look, you must know what an Orc looks like. They are everywhere. They must have given political immunity to a million

Orcs when they used them as extras in that Lord of the Kings debacle (a.k.a. the movie).

Suffice to say, if you don't know the difference between an Orc and a Goblin at this point, you're not even trying and you probably wouldn't even listen if I tried to tell you.

Dear Reverend Lord of the Written Word,

Enclosed please find the deed to my house, keys to my car, and a check to cover any tax consequences said gifts might bring.

I work at the docks and so I work next to Orcs, Goblins, and Trolls. My boss is an Ogre and the manager is a Pit Fiend.

The thing is Gary the Goblin has buckteeth and wears a do-rag on his head, while Gomez is more traditional and prefers facial scars and fur clothing. They are two distinct individuals originating from separate clans, each making their own separate way in the world.

It would be helpful when reading if you would describe each specific Goblin, Troll, etc, so I could get a better feel for each unique character.

A Formerly Rich Fan

A car and deed to a house? I can make time in my busy, lazing on the beach schedule, which us authors like to call "working on the plot," to personally respond to such a letter.

Dear Formerly Rich Fan,

Due to the demands on my time, I am unable to maintain a correspondence with all of my fans. Should your monetary situation change, please feel free to contact me at that time.

In regards to your statement that not all Goblins are alike, you are wrong. The full descriptor of a Goblin can be found in the word 'Goblin'.

If you had known this fact, I am sure instead of being a Formerly Rich Fan, you would now, in fact, be a Rich Fan.

Sincerely,

Worlds Greatest (and Now Wealthiest) Author

PS. The car needs washing, if you would come by next week and clean it that would be nice. I'll be at the beach Wednesday afternoon, so that would be the best time.

And I think that's it for the filler.

We are now down to the wire, almost at the start of the book.

Isn't it exciting? Me, I can hardly wait.

99,987, 99,988, 99,989, 99,990, 99,991, 99,992...

And now, without further ado, our feature presentation:

Minataur Tails.

As you can see, the story is so well set up, here, in the very first chapter, it almost writes itself from here on out. Anyway, request the manuscript, you won't be disappointed.

1

Introducing Buddy

The Minataur's role in this production will now be played by Buddy. Buddy is a relative new comer to the fantasy fiction scene, most of his previous work being done on the classical stage. Buddy brings with him a fresh face, can do attitude, and team spirit. We are happy to have him on board.

Contrary to popular opinion the decision to change the lead was not brought about by "artistic differences" or the legal suit filed on behalf of the overzealous Tiltens Estate. No. The

explanation is much simpler. We suddenly realized that since the Minataur is never fully described, it was foolish to pay an advance and a big chunk of the royalties just to be able to use Minne's face on the cover of the book.

(Please note: any similarity between Minne, the Minataur on the cover, and any merchandising tie-in is completely coincidental. I mean really, once you've seen one Minataur you've seen them all.)

And now, back to our story.

But first, if all of these asides have caused confusion and you're not quite sure where we are, let us recap:

Buddy was a Minataur. It was the first thing people noticed about him. Like all Minataurs, he had the head of a bull and the body of a man. Buddy looked an awful lot like Minne the Minataur. In fact, if plush dolls were to be made for merchandizing purposes of both Buddy and Minne, the resulting dolls would look amazingly similar. (Just trust me on this.)

Not that anyone would ever want to buy a Minne the Minataur plush doll. He was a has-been -- his career past its prime with future opportunities curtailed by the overzealous Tiltens Estate. Buddy on the other hand was a rising star with a starring role in his very own book -- not to mention a vast array of merchandizing tie-ins on the drawing board.

Once the fact that Buddy was a Minataur sunk in, the second thing one might notice about Buddy was that he was a bit of a jerk. Now I should make clear here, we're talking about the character in the book and not the actor behind the role. Buddy from the classical stage is a swell guy. He's the type of Minataur you'd be happy to invite over to your house to watch the big game. You could be sure he'd bring a couple extra pouches of Juicy-Juicy, a bag of chips to share, and he'd be polite enough to root for the same team as his host.

But the Buddy that this story revolves around is a whole different Minataur. He's the type of Minataur that you'd never

want to invite over to watch the game. (And now that I think about it, he's kind of like Minne). First of all, he'd show up wearing Bronco colors even though he knows you're a Bears fan. Then he'd rub it in your face every time the Broncos scored. I mean, get a grip. It's only a game. But that would only be the tip of the iceberg. He wouldn't bring any Juicy-Juicy or chips. And during half time he would hit on your girlfriend!

The point is, this is a complicated story and it might get a bit confusing at times. One minute we'll be talking about what a swell guy Buddy is and how we really appreciate the fruit basket he sent over when we were sick. And then the next moment we'll be talking about what a self centered jerk he is. Rest assured, if the Minne -- I mean the Buddy (going to have to talk to my proofreaders) -- in this story ever does anything nice, it's just the Minataur behind the role shining through, which when you stop to think about isn't really very professional of him at all.

2

Jerk First - Minataur Second

Buddy loved the stampede. Buddy loved the smell, the feel, the taste; he loved the flecks of dirt, the dung, the twigs, and the grass that pelted his face. He loved the roar of the hooves, the thunder of the charge, and the excitement that hung in the air. Buddy was a Minataur. He was a herd animal. And this was where he belonged: in the thick of it, in a stampede.

Only moments ago, Buddy had been in his rightful place at the front of the herd, but he had dropped back to the middle where he was surrounded on all sides by tens of thousands of cows, steers, wilder beasts, zebras, buffalo, kalfnics, dakouts, and countless others. They were all headed to the slaughterhouse, all but the Minataurs who guided them. Buddy didn't think much about that. It was just the way of it, the way things were. And when you looked at them closely, sometimes things just didn't make much sense.

Like the Centaur riding beside Buddy. The Dark Gnome in the stockyards had said something about how the Centaur had gotten into a high stakes poker game and been unable to make good on his bet. Buddy looked at the Centaur. His hands were tied behind his back. His eyes were blindfolded. And in a few days, he would be transformed into a hamburger at the local Manna King or maybe into a can of Roughneck™ brand Dog Chow.

Buddy leaned closer to the Centaur so that his voice could be heard over the thundering din of the pounding hooves, “Stupid thing that, making a bet you couldn’t pay.”

“What?” the Centaur yelled, not quite making out the gist of what Buddy had said.

“You made a bad bet,” Buddy explained curtly. He didn’t like having to repeat himself.

“I was cheated,” the Centaur pleaded frantically. “Marked cards. I was set up.”

Buddy considered this. It was probably true. But that wasn’t Buddy’s problem. That wasn’t his job. His job was to bring the herd in. And a conscious Centaur screaming out his innocence wasn’t going to make that job any easier. So as the herd galloped along, Buddy grabbed the Centaur by the hair and pulled his body closer to his own and then punched the Centaur in the back of the head a few dozen times. One punch would have done the trick, but Buddy was nothing if not excessive, continuing to strike the creature long after its sentience had passed away, all the while the animal beneath continuing to follow its instinct and run with the herd.

Now clearly, Buddy was not a particularly caring creature. But then, he wasn’t a particularly stupid creature either. And had he known in advance how much trouble that particular Centaur was going to cause him, he would have let him go then and there... or killed him on the spot. Either alternative would have been fine with Buddy. Though in truth, killing the Centaur would probably have been more fun.

Of course, it wasn't just the Centaur that was going to get Buddy into trouble. It was the Pegasus family whose wings had been clipped and bound. It was the Unicorn whose horn had been cut off and sold a dozen vortexes back. And it was the Ortinung who loped along at the edge of the herd, curious to see where everyone was going and what the rush was all about.

A hundred years ago at the Citadel, they would not have cared. Meat was meat. And food was food. They would have paid the same for a steer as a half dead Centaur. But the herd was not going towards the Citadel today. And it was not a hundred years ago (because like I said, it was today). And today (not to be confused with a hundred years ago), they were headed towards Rigor Pass: the town that had become The Dragon's operational center ever since the coronation of his new Consort, Ruby Firehaven (a thing which, although it had occurred neither today nor a hundred years ago, had occurred significantly closer to the former than the later).

And once that had happened (the coronation of the Consort, that is), things had changed quickly. I mean, before she was even confirmed, Ruby had outlawed weapons and banished K'fr from the kingdom! So, really. Anyone who had given the matter even a moment's thought should have realized that Ruby was probably also going to have a soft spot in her heart for Centaurs, Pegasus, Unicorns, Ortinungs, and all the other sentients in the herd, not to mention the horses; and when you got right down to it, maybe even the stupid mindless cows, too. One could never tell with this Consort. But one thing was sure, Ruby was never going to stand idly by while a Centaur or a Pegasus was turned into lunchmeat (no matter how well it tasted or how fine a job those folks at H©ME F©©Ds, Inc. were doing).

And in the end, it was sort of odd that Buddy had overlooked this little quirk of Ruby's, because overall Buddy had given a great deal of thought to the new Consort. Specifically, Buddy had given a great deal of thought as to what the Consort's outlawing of K'fr would do to the drug's market price and what this in turn would

mean for the personal finances of an enterprising young Minataur who even now was riding towards Rigor Pass with a saddlebag packed full of the illegal substance.

Yes, Buddy had given it all a great deal of thought.

You see, bashing a Centaur in the back of the head for the sheer joy of it (and thereby establishing the evilness of his character to even the dimmest of readers) had not been the only reason why Buddy had dropped into the center of the herd. It was a decided bonus, true. (All of it.) But it was not the principal reason. You see, the reason Buddy had left his rightful place at the front of the herd was because the stampede was approaching the edge of The Dragon's domain.

In times of old (and as recently as four months ago -- just before Ruby arrived on the scene), riders bringing a herd to market would fire their guns as they entered Rigor Pass -- both in celebration and to clear the streets of pedestrians. They would start firing at the outskirts of town and continue shooting until the last cow, Centaur, or Ortinung had been steered into the corral. It was good clean Gra'gl loving fun -- not to mention, the Minataur way.

But all of that had stopped when the Consort had banned weapons. Why? Because after the ban, weapons simply did not exist in all of the Seven Realms or anywhere else that lay within The Dragon's domain. You see, a person (or a Minataur for that matter) could put a gun into their holster outside of The Dragon's realms, and they could shoot it outside of The Dragon's realms to their heart's content. But the moment they crossed over into The Dragon's kingdom, the gun would disappear. It simply wouldn't be there -- in their hand, in their holster, or anywhere for that matter.

And since even the dimmest of creatures realized (or soon learned the hard way) that it was difficult to shoot a gun that wasn't there, the tradition had been altered slightly. Now, riders shot off their guns as they approached The Dragon's domain and continued to fire until the guns vanished from their hands.

So with all of that foreshadowing, it should come as absolutely no surprise that the herd was rapidly approaching the border (even as we speak, read, write, or whatever). And the Minataurs leading the herd began shooting their lever action Winchester -- of the type favored by Minataurs in spaghetti westerns since time immemorial. And slowly -- one by one -- the shooting stopped as the Minataur riders crossed the border.

Buddy, on the other hand, did not draw his gun. Instead, he closed his eyes and concentrated. He wanted to know whether or not he could sense the edge of The Dragon's domain or feel the border as he crossed it.

But Buddy could not. He kept his eyes shut long after he was sure he had crossed the border. But the entire time, he did not notice a single thing, not a tingle, not a tangle, not even a whisper. Crossing the border had not elicited any perceivable sensation in Buddy, at all.

A little disappointed, but not overly surprised, Buddy opened his eyes. Up ahead, his Minataur brethren were trying to holster guns that were no longer there. It was a wonderful way to lose a rifle, Buddy mused. If the gun wasn't there, how did you know if you had put it in your holster or not? No doubt, many a Minataur would need to purchase another lever action Winchester -- of the type favored by Minataurs since time immemorial in spaghetti westerns -- after they left The Dragon's domain. But not Buddy. For, he had not taken his gun out of its holster. Buddy already knew what he would tell anyone if they asked why he hadn't -- that he simply hadn't wanted to lose his weapon. That's what he would tell them, anyway. But the real reason Buddy had not shot off his gun was because he had not wanted anyone to notice when his gun did not disappear.

Even now, hidden under its covering flap of leather, nestled safely in its holster was Buddy's AK-47/5889x assault rifle.

(Now, with side-mounted dual rocket launchers and a high-powered energy weapon mounted under the tradition kinetic slug

thrower -- you know, just in case someone -- anyone -- should find themselves in a quasi science fiction vortex towards the end of their adventure where only the latest in futuristic beam weapons will do. Not that that's where we're necessarily headed with this here story, mind you. All that color text is there just for your general edification. And just so your knowledge of the AK-47/5889x is complete, I'll also just mention that this splendid firearm comes standard in gunmetal blue, but chrome, silver, gold, and jewel encrusted models are available for a slightly higher fee. Not being a flashy creature by nature (unlike say Minne), Buddy had chosen the gunmetal blue.)

The marketing interlude over, Buddy reached under his holster's gun flap, so he could confirm that the weapon had not disappeared and feel its reassuring presence.

(The AK-47/5889x: Who says you can't buy confidence? Armor piecing shells extra. Not available in all markets (or the Seven Realms). See your nearest arms dealer for complete disclaimer.)

Buddy grinned inwardly. His gun was still there. It had not disappeared. Why? Because The Dragon's laws did not apply to him. Buddy was not bound by any decree of the Consort. He was Buddy the Minataur. He was a Prince. And for Gra'gl's sake, let's hope it doesn't come as any surprise at this point, he had diplomatic immunity on account of his royal birth (which in the end, is just another way of saying that Buddy was akin to a traveling bit of foreign sovereignty in and of himself).

And since I've already mentioned it and because it had been a few minutes since he'd chewed a hunk, Buddy reached into his saddlebag -- or what he liked to refer to these days as his diplomatic pouch -- and felt for the sticky hunk of compressed K'fr, which waited for him there. Finding it quickly, because the K'fr pretty much filled his saddlebag to the brim, Buddy tore off a chunk, put a plug of the illegal substance into his mouth, and began to chew.

Being of the highest quality (as only royalty can afford) the K'fr acted quickly. And within moments, Buddy was not so much traveling with the herd as he was drawn along with it.

Instinctually, he felt the ancestral pull of the stampede in his blood.

Instantaneously, he developed a sense of kinship with all its members.

And ironically, he sensed the comfort of being at the protected center of the group far from the other Minataur riders at the front. It would be they who first encountered any danger and they who guided the herd along and kept it traveling in the right direction. Far away, pushed to the outskirts and the rear, were the weak, the stragglers, those who could not keep up or muscle their way towards the center. Of these, some would invariably fall behind, while others would be sacrificed to predators.

Of course, there was more than one sort of predator. If things went as planned, out of the tens of thousand who now galloped across the plains, only the few dozen Minataur riders would live to see the end of the week. The rest were bound for the slaughterhouse. They would be better off not running with the herd or following along. But they had no choice. The instinct was too deep, the urge too primordial. They were helpless but to follow wherever their leaders led.

As these myriad thoughts flashed through Buddy's mind, he watched with appreciation as the Minataur riders in the lead altered their direction so subtly, the herd's shift into the next dimensional world was almost imperceptibly.

(But then I ask, where's the drama in that?)

So almost immediately after that, the lead riders felt the need to alter their course again, but this time in such a way that it would be hard for anyone to miss, and turned the galloping throng downward into the earth itself. It was exactly as if the herd had been transformed into some great burrowing creature that was somehow tunneling its way through vortex after vortex as it heaved a great spray of dirt, mud, and dung into the air in its wake. Being

in the middle, Buddy was quickly covered in the filth. But he didn't care. They were now several worlds closer to Rigor Pass and that much closer to the herd's demise.

Buddy laughed with delight at the thought. They were all in a hurry to get to the slaughterhouse. They couldn't wait to become hamburgers. The lot of them were racing towards their own death and destruction.

And then suddenly, Buddy realized his place was not here in the middle. He was a natural born leader. He was royalty. His place was at the front in the lead.

So spurring his mount onward, he surged forward. And by the time the herd had broken through to the next vortex -- a dusty, gravel stepped plain with purple clouds hanging low in the sky -- Buddy had regained his rightful place at the front, leading the rest.

His brain befuddled by K'fr -- only slightly more conscious than the Centaur he had left behind in the center of the herd -- Buddy spurred his mount onward ever faster, bloodying its flank. If it was a race they wanted, then it was a race they'd get. No one was going to beat Buddy.

Even if the only thing waiting for Buddy at the finish line was death, Buddy was going to get there first.

3 #
Acting!

Wow! I think that sums it up. Wow!

The plot just opens right up with a K'fr addicted Minataur who happily sells his herd off to the slaughterhouse. Now that's drama. That's action. In your usual cheap fantasy novel you'd have to wait until the second or third chapter for action like that, but not here. We open right up with the good stuff.

Now, I know a lot of you are wondering. Well, wondering is probably the wrong word. Composing a letter to the author is probably more like it. Something along the lines of:

Dear Noble Sir,

Wow!

A K'fr addicted Minataur who'll happily sell off his own herd for a few bucks.

I'll say it again. Wow!

The thing is in the last book [The Dragon Bound Quartet, available wherever BETTER books are sold] both weapons and K'fr were outlawed throughout the Seven Realms. But now as the action opens [in Minataur Tails, also available wherever BETTER books are sold, just in case you wanted to get yourself a second copy while the getting's good], it appears that the plot is going to revolve around both weapons and K'fr.

What gives?

I thought this was a child friendly series.

Your Adoring Fan

The first thing I noticed about this letter was that my supposedly "Adoring Fan" failed to include the most important part of any letter. Oh wait, my mistake. I didn't read far enough.

P.S. I've got a summer house in Tuscany. If you'd like to stay there for a few months, years, whatever, just let me know.

Personally I think Tuscany is overrated, but the Adoring Fan did make the effort, so I think an explanation is in order. K'fr is an important part of our modern cross-vortex culture. Experiencing the full scope and wonder of this...

(Unconscionable, K'fr induced rant deleted by the Editor.)

...K'fr exists. It's part of reality. If you don't want to deal with the issues of the day, then you shouldn't be reading light fantasy fiction.

Heads Up,

I think the point your Adoring Fan was trying to make was that by having Buddy brutalize a Centaur in the opening scene, it will be harder to identify with him later on.

Who wants to follow the story of a psychopathic Minataur?

Your Editor

P.S. You don't want to kill the franchise, do you?

Kill the franchise you say? Well now, that is a serious consideration. I think the best thing to do is let Buddy come out here and speak for himself.

Say hello to the folks Buddy.

“Hey, ya.”

So, that was pretty brutal. I mean you just clobbered that Centaur. You didn't even care that he was going to get turned into a tasty can of Roughneck™ brand Dog Chow as made by the fine folks at Slaughterhouse, Inc..

“Oh, hey. That's just like part of the script,” Buddy explains as he wipes his dirty face with a checkered red bandana. “I would never do something like that in real life.” And then turning to yell over his shoulder, Buddy adds, “Come on out here, Hank.”

Hank the Centaur wanders out while wiping his chest with a towel. “Gee, Howdy. My agent told me this was a one page gig. Short and sweet. In and out. Who would of thought I'd get a talking role in the next chapter?”

It would appear that we are getting nasty fan mail, Hank. Folks are complaining (mainly the editor) that the previous scene was too violent.

“I suppose it would have been if it was real,” Hank explains as he turns to the audience. “But it wasn't. I'm a highly trained stunt Centaur and Buddy was pulling his punches.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely,” Buddy agrees.

But, it all looked so real.

“What I do is focus a lot of the latent anger that I have,” Buddy explains. “I just pretend that my agent has called to let me know that I’ve lost another role to that Minne clown and I just rage. It’s all I can do to pull my punches.”

So, does that cover it?

“Well, not everything,” Buddy goes on. “As you all know, Minne was originally slated for this role. And I’m not one to be spreading rumors, but in a bid for authenticity it would appear Minne started doing K’fr to see what it was like. And well, things got out of hand. A little became a lot. And in the end, I heard he had to check into a clinic.

“It’s just as well,” Hank jumps in, agreeing (perhaps too) eagerly. “Minne threw punches like a girl. You’d never get any realism out of that scene if Minne was doing it. And he doesn’t pull his punches, either. You know, I may be a bit character, but I bleed like the rest of them. I don’t need no hotshot star hitting me as hard as he can just because it ‘adds realism’ to the moment. I got your realism right here, Minne.”

OK. Then.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am to be a part of this production,” Buddy continues in a well metered, highly polished delivery, eerily reminiscent of someone repeating words their publicist had told them to say only moments ago. “As you know, I’ve never done a fantasy farce before. Most of my previous work has been on the classical stage -- Shake-Spear, that sort of thing. So this is a really exiting for me. I can’t say how glad I am to be part of the Dragon Bound team.”

You’re doing a great job.

“Thanks. Um, if we’re done then, can I go? I’ve got a hot date.”

Sure.

See there, folks? The punches were pulled and none of the K’fr in the story is real. It’s just a prop... because Minne couldn’t handle his K’fr and ruined it for the rest of us! Or, er, um, rather,

because having any characters use real K'fr would set a bad example for any children in the audience.

Anyhow, for those who can't take the suspense and just to get that editor chap off my back, I'll come clean and let you know right up front that Hank -- the Centaur -- doesn't get killed at the slaughterhouse... because that, too, would be wrong. Just plain wrong!

So wrong in fact, that it is a direct result of the ensuing police investigation to determine who was responsible for delivering a half-dead Centaur to the slaughterhouse in the first place that causes Buddy to get picked up for possession of K'fr by the Rigor Pass Police Department, proving that CRIME DOES NOT PAY and VIRTUE IS IT'S OWN REWARD.

But really, now we're just giving major plot points away.

4

It's a sequel

What about Ruby?

What about Grt?

Your Exasperated Editor

You know, if you're exasperated, maybe you should take a vacation or something. Relax. Unwind. Go to the beach. Like it said at the end of the first book, The Dragon Bound Quartet, by this very same author -- available wherever better books are sold...

And let's face it, if you're going to understand the random references to Crazy George and Raging Bertha or sympathize with Pete the Paladin, you're really going to need to pick up that first book. And don't even start in with that tired old excuse about how The Dragon Bound Quartet isn't available in your vortex. Send away for it, take a trip to an outlying dimension, or make an outlandish bid on Manna Bay in the dark of the night. Trust me, all these wonderful inside jokes will be lost on you if you don't know the full story.

But I guess if you're going to be cheap and not fork over the gold, the least I can do is recap and explain things to you. Just like it said at the end of The Dragon Bound Quartet, Ruby pursued her lifelong dream of going to high school. And as such, this is where we shall catch up with her.

Granted, it's not much of a dream. It's not like joining the circus, curing cancer, or cavorting around the Seven Realms on the back of a dragon, but I say, to each her own. I mean, you had to admit that Ruby had rid the Seven Realms of K'fr, not to mention weapons, so she probably deserved a break. And if she wanted to take that break by going to high school, that was pretty much up to her, now wasn't it?

Still, somewhere along the line, I should probably get back to my editor's point and that was:

Ruby is a great character.

Grt has star potential.

And they both have leading roles in this here adventure, so let's spend a moment and look in on Ruby in her Algebra class.

As you might expect, Grt is sitting next to her in a desk of his very own. Of course, Grt doesn't really understand algebra, so he just spends most of his time drawing with crayons. But the important thing is that he's happy to be with Ruby.

Or maybe it's more important to realize that Ruby doesn't understand algebra either? I mean, I'm not presenting The Dragon's Consort's ignorance of this subject matter as a role model to be emulated. I'm just relating things the way they are. But then, you probably don't need me to talk over the story anymore. So, let's just join them in their algebra class, shall we?

V

Manna, Magic, & Ribbons

Welcome to the Minataur Tails infamous hidden chapter (the chapter which was added in the 14th edition after wild spread

criticism to the changes made to Chapter 5 in the 13th edition by Gnomes the multiverse round).

Basically, the next chapter (Chapter 5) pretty much sucked as originally written, as approved by my editor, and as marched off the printing presses for... well, 13 editions.

To give you an idea of what the chapter was originally like, let me share excerpts from some typical "fan" mail concerning said chapter.

Oh, my Gra'gl! Talk about boring.

Great, you hit the 100K mark. Did you have to put all of the extra words in Chapter 5?

I have now found the cure for insomnia.

And, so on.

It's not the type of mail an author likes to get, so I rewrote the chapter. What did I take out? Interesting you should ask. I took out most of the stuff about:

A) How manna is almost completely indistinguishable from decorating ribbon of the type commonly used to wrap packages in some of your more backward dimensions only that manna is magical whereas decorating ribbon of the type commonly used to wrap packages in your more backward dimensions is not. So really, they're not very much alike at all.

B) How Ruby grew up before the "borders" dropped, but was still young enough when they did to be fully effected by magic. I even went so far as to include a short history of her vortex, which I am told was especially boring (like really, really, really excruciatingly boring).

C) And how Ruby constructed a magical pouch between the end of The Dragon Bound Quartet and the beginning of Minataur Tails.

It's a pretty short list, right?

Well, for whatever reason, I was feeling long winded when I originally put it down, so the chapter ended up being like five

times longer than any other chapter in the book. Anyhow, the 13th edition came around, Dragon Bound publishing asked me to double check the galley proofs, and I simply deleted everything boring, which was more or less the entirety of the chapter. My editor didn't care and no one else noticed, so that edition went to publication with a vastly diminished fifth chapter.

Of course when I say, no one noticed or no one cared, what I really should say is that no one noticed or no one cared except for the Gnomes.

Hey, Celli
What happened to Chapter 5?
It's been gutted.
A Gnome

Dear Celli
Is the manna that Ruby uses Type I or Type II.
What's its magical coefficient?
What's its omega?
What's its epsilon...
And so forth.

I'll be honest, I didn't even know manna had an omega or an epsilon or that they could possibly matter. And I, like, know my magic (or like to think that I do), so I'm pretty sure this guy was just making all that stuff up.

But all the same, the letters kept coming.

Most Revered Celli
I was but a wee lad when Minataur Tails first came out. I remember the joy of sitting on my papa's knee reading the tale of Ruby, Grt, and the rest. And at work or play over the years, whenever I had a question about manna, I could always go back to that illustrious fifth chapter, and lo and behold, there the answer would be.

Married, with a son of my own, I decided I would pass on the joy of that chapter to my son, and so I bought him a copy of Minatuar Tails (14th edition, Planar Vortex), so he too would know all that there was to know about manna.

Imagine my shock, surprise, and utter disappointment when he read that chapter aloud.

Oh, the humanity!

Oh, the butchering!

Oh, the disappointment!

[three pages of 'Oh, the [blanks]' deleted]

There's nothing left. Where's the matrix? The cross reference chart? And more importantly, the step by step instructions on making a trans-dimensional storage pouch. That was to be his first project -- to show he had finally become a full grown Gnome.

I feel cheated.

Bring it back.

Garundson Stevenson, Shop Steward

Shoemaker, Purse, & Leatherworkers Local #1

Yes, well. Very impressive credentials Mr. Garundson. But I'm not bringing the original Chapter 5 back, no matter what you and every last blessed Gnome in all of existence has to say about it. The chapter was boring, it needed to be shortened, so that's just what I did.

In other matters, I do have the original copy of the original rough draft (hand written on vellum, by the author's own hand, very precious, I'm told). And I would be more than happy to part with the full original chapter (along with notes, addendum, and cross-referenced back up charts) should the price be right. I'm thinking one of those Wallet Do-hickeys that always stays full no matter how much you spend. But then, me and my girlfriend have hit a sort of rough spot in our relationship, so in the interest of

appeasing her, I'd settle for one of those Magical Purse Thingies that never runs out of gold, jewelry, and gems instead.

Anyhow, without further ado, I give you the breezy, newly edited, much shorter, and easier to read Chapter 5.

5

Mr. Thwartbridge the Junior
a.k.a. Mr. Thwartbridge

Ruby's algebra teacher was a kind hearted Troll named Mr. Thwartbridge. Now as you probably know, Trolls take their jobs seriously and Mr. Thwartbridge was among the most serious of Trolls. I like to think this was because he taught algebra out of a deep love for his father, a Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior (a.k.a. Max), who worked a bridge $y=x^2+6$ dimensions away where the toll to cross the bridge was the solution to a math problem.

Now, I know what you're thinking. But trust me, it's not like that. Max's job was Not about denying passage or frustrating adventures -- though the latter was a common enough occurrence. Rather his role (at least, in all the stories in which he has appeared so far, [hint, hint]) was to make a metaphorical allusion to the importance of math and algebra in the life of each and every youngster who counted themselves amongst the reading public.

(And, yes. That means you, kiddo!)

And of course, there was nothing Max liked better than asking complicated third-dimensional polynomic multi-factorial questions to passing travelers, but it was a rare day indeed when someone could answer one of those suckers.

So usually, Max just held up a board with three letters and a number on it and travelers had to pick out the number from the letters to cross the bridge. It was a sign of the times that it took so many travelers four guesses to get it right. Of course, on some rare occasions it would take a befuddled traveler a full dozen guesses to get it right. And once a year or so, Max would have to refuse

passage across his bridge because a traveler was stumped and could not identify which of the four symbols on his magical board was a number. All the same, Mr. Thwartbridge Senior couldn't help but be pleased when someone got one of those third dimensional do-jobby things right. It just sort of made his day.

Anyway, Mr. Thwartbridge Junior had grown up listening to tales of algebraic daring do, compound factorial meta-fiction, and suspenseful tensor transformational epics with their surprise twist endings at his father's knee. And he had reasoned that the surest way to please his father would be to educate the world in all things algebraic; so someday, when one of his students showed up at his father's bridge, they'd be able to solve the most complicated algebraic conundrum his father could throw at them. [Again, hint, hint hint. Guess where this here story's eventually going to go.]

Anyhow and as such, Mr. Thwartbridge Junior (hereinafter called Mr. Thwartbridge) had become an algebra teacher. It was a job with numerous opportunities for emotional reward... and near limitless potential for mind-numbing frustration.

The frustration this semester was being delivered by the hands of Grt, a harvester dragon, who had been magically transformed over the course of The Dragon Bound Quartet into a personal magic caddy for Ruby Firehaven, Consort to The Dragon. That's a dense bit of information (i.e. a complicated little sentence), but if you had read The Dragon Bound Quartet like you were supposed to for homework, this would all be review, so don't blame me if you're confused by it all.

Anyhow, as was more or less beaten to death in (you guessed it) The Dragon Bound Quartet (the story to which this very tale is a sequel), Grt was awfully cute. He was also lovable, stood about three feet tall, and sported brown scales. But the one thing you really need to know about him is that being a baby drag-goon and having being more-or-less gifted to Ruby by The Dragon, Grt was intensely devoted to Ruby. In fact, the only reason Grt was in Mr. Thwartbridge's class at all was so he could sit next to Ruby.

“Dis funs, Rubies,” Grt said suddenly, cutting the reader's attention away from the boring narrative (that would have continued for another three pages in previous editions), as he drew a great big red G on his paper next to his name. Mr. Thwartbridge might know his algebra, but he didn't know his alphabet. He kept on handing Grt's tests back with great big red letter F's on them. Grt knew this was wrong. His name was Grt. It started with a G. Obviously, his papers should come back with a great big red G on them. So, he figured he was helping Mr. Thwartbridge out. Maybe if Grt showed the nice, kind-hearted Troll an example of a properly graded paper, Mr. Thwartbridge would finally get with the program and start giving Grt G's like he deserved.

As Grt was doing this and singing merrily to himself, “Grt, Grt, Grt,” Mr. Thwartbridge looked up from his stack of papers and leveled his eyes at the annoying little drag-goon. “Shsssh,” he said.

“He gotta da leakies again,” Grt remarked as the rest of the class tittered.

“There is no talking during a test, Mr. Grt.” There was no helping some of his students. Mr. Thwartbridge knew that if Grt ever showed up at this father's bridge, it would take him four guesses (at least!) at the letter board to get across. It was pathetic really. Grt had taken to grading his own papers before handing them in, but the poor drag-goon, as he insisted on calling himself, wasn't with the program enough to realize that a G wasn't a grade.

But then, we were in the middle of a conversation when I so rudely interrupted. And as I recall, just a short while ago Mr. Thwartbridge had said, “There is no talking during a test, Mr. Grt.”

To which Grt, being the inquisitive little drag-goon that he was, replied, “Den why'd you talkees?”

Oddly, Mr. Thwartbridge was in no mood for such an inquiry and so he simply replied, “Grt, I want you to be quiet while the rest of the class completes the test.”

Grt thought about saying, "It's good to want things," but Mr. Thwartbridge had only sent him to the principal's office the last time Grt had said that particular line. So instead, Grt turned the test over and drew a picture of Ruby, Raging Bertha, and himself racing up the side of Mt. D©©m in the dead of the night in an eighteen-wheel manna delivery vehicle, an adventure which occurred somewhere in the middle of The Dragon Bound Quartet.

And while we're mentioning The Dragon Bound Quartet, I should mention that The Dragon Bound Quartet took place about four months prior to this particular scene and concluded with a combination Coronation Ball / Happy Fifteen Birthday Party for Ruby. And that means that if one did a little math (we are in a math class, after all), one could quickly deduce from all this that Ruby was just slightly over fifteen years old.

Ruby is (or so I have been told) a fairly typical fifteen year old human girl... except that she has dazzling red hair, can work magic, and regularly trounces around the Seven Realms on fun filled adventures doing The Dragon's bidding on account of the fact that she is his Consort -- a word, title, and job description, which leads, oh, so many astray.

Some folks are absolutely convinced that being a Consort means... well, that.

They just know for certain that being a Consort means... this.

They think they've got it all figured out and that it's simply disgusting that a dragon (any dragon, mind you) would have a child as their consort and a fifteen year old human, at that.

All I can say is: My, but these people seem to know an awful lot. Because trust me, I don't know what The Dragon's Consort does. The Dragon doesn't know what The Dragon's Consort does. And as his Consort, Ruby doesn't have the slightest idea as to the extent of her official duties as Consort to The Dragon. Oh, she has a rough idea. Something about how she can (if she wants to) attend ceremonies and functions of State in The Dragon's absence. But past that sort of trite cosmetic answer, neither of them can (or at least, will) say what being the Consort means.

When pressed, The Dragon tends to hem and haw and go on about how he mislaid that particular decree way back in his Thirteenth Dynasty... during the Great Library Reorganization, some 1,500 years ago.

And as for Ruby, she just doesn't know. What I'm saying is, if you push her on the subject, she's good for saying something witty like, "I don't know." Okay, stupid joke. But then, most jokes are.

But even after having said all that, there have been times when Ruby's guard has been down and she has ventured to guess that being the Consort means that she sort of co-rules the Seven Realms with The Dragon; and that means advising him and guiding him lest he go astray. Like for instance, if Ruby had been around when The Dragon was coming up with the name for his personal advisor, voice of the people, and all that, she might have pointed out that naming the position Consort to The Dragon might not be such a good idea and how it might give certain folks the wrong idea. But then, Ruby wasn't The Dragon's Consort at the time, and the gal who was probably knew exactly what she was implying when she started calling herself Consort to The Dragon (i.e. "Back off, he's mine").

Of course, Ruby wasn't thinking about all of this right then in school. Algebra is a tricky subject, after all, and Ruby was taking a test, so Ruby was preoccupied by what any typical fifteen year old with magical powers would be preoccupied with at such a time: how to use her magic to pass said test, because without a little "extra" help, Ruby didn't stand a chance.

Now, I'm not going to call what Ruby was contemplating, cheating. Cheating is such a harsh word, and like the word consort has many negative connotations attached to it. Besides, in the end Ruby was simply availing herself of all the resources at her disposal in solving the problems that the world was throwing at her, and if that was cheating, well then, I guess that was cheating.

In case any of that was unclear, I'll make it easier for you. Ruby was cheating and as we all know, the only one she was cheating was herself. And having said that, with a smug, self righteous attitude, the author continued, but not quite in the direction he had been going only moments before because there was still a lot of back story to cover. Yeah, that's right, I'm talking to you, Mr. I'm Too Cheap to Buy the First Book in the Series (i.e. The Dragon Bound Quartet.)

[Granted, this is still pretty dry, but I cut as much as I dare, lest the Gnomes go ballistic.]

As we all know, the Earth is covered with an amazing number of magical portals, vortexes, gates, and whatever else you care to name. If you go back in time to ancient history, say the late (19)80's or early (19)90's all of these magical portals were barred and closed to passage. Yet, for some inexplicit reason a little while later all of the barriers holding back contact with other worlds vanished. And then, like air rushing into a vacuum, magic rushed into the mundane world bringing with it all manner of magical creatures. As you can imagine, this made life on Earth pretty darn cool. All of a sudden you could look out your window and see a Pegasus flying in the air or if you were lucky you could catch a Leprechaun at the end of a rainbow (but just between you and me, don't drink anything out of his "pot of gold," it's not lemonade if you catch my drift). Anyhow, all of this also meant that a demon could appear in the middle of a shopping mall and start going ballistic or a devil could take over your 401K program and rewrite the rules so 401K now meant you had to work 401,000 years before you could retire.

In short, Pegasus and Leprechauns are Good (or sort of good unless they offer you a drink), while Demons and Devils are Bad (all of the time).

Anyhow, after a few towns in the Midwest got leveled... and I do mean leveled, as in obliterated, removed from the face of the earth, nothing left, a nice even plain of pebbly dirt with only

charred smoking ruins as a cruel reminder of what had once been there. The kind of leveling a renegade Demon, Devil, or dragon might unleash on the landscape. You know the story: he killed your family, ruined your crops, and destroyed everything you've worked your whole life for. The kind of leveling that is oddly reminiscent of a nasty divorce, wherein it's impossible to remember the happy times on a warm Jamaican beach... You know, that sort of leveling.

Well, it didn't take the complete destruction of very many towns, villages, small cities, or hamlets before it was decided that the problems inherent in letting Demons and Devils fly about greatly outweighed the aesthetic benefits of seeing the occasional flock of Pegasi. And as such, it was decided the best protection against magical invaders was to use up and consume all the free floating magic, otherwise known as manna.

A Devil, Demon, dragon, or Pegasus can't get very far without a readily available source of magic, so it was thought this would keep the magical creatures out of the mundane world. It didn't work. It turns out all you need to do is take a few magic supplement pills every day, and even the most manna intense needs of a Demon from beyond the Ninth Plane will be met, but that was the idea. Who knew it wouldn't work? OK. Everyone on the other side knew, but that is neither here nor there.

The point is, when Ruby was nine, The Great Magic Give Away -- as some called the blessed event -- was voted into law and the rights to magic were sold off, much like the rights to oil, coal, or any other marketable resource. The Dragon, through his holding company the MDM (a.k.a. Mt. D©©m Magic: Harvesting and Containment) controls the magic concession around Mt. Russell where Ruby lives, and which is now called Mt. D©©m by pretty much everybody on this side or the other.

What the MDM does is pretty simple; it collects all the free floating manna within a hundred miles of Mt. D©©m. In theory they then sell the magic like a normal utility company might, but the truth of the matter is The Dragon uses all of the magic he

collects to help maintain his vast empire. Anyhow, because the MDM and all the other utilities collect every last strand of free floating mana that they can get their grubby little hands on, the Earth is once again as mana poor as any other dimension out there. And so while in the Earth vortex, Ruby is unable to simply rub her fingers together and thereby gather the magical energy she needs to cast spells. And that's where Grt comes in. As I said, he's a magic caddy: whenever Ruby needs some mana and she's in a place -- or spot -- where rubbing her fingers together won't do the trick, she turns to Grt and he hands her a strand or two of mana. But in the end, Ruby realized that Grt wouldn't always be around and even Mr. Thwartbridge might notice if Grt handed Ruby a ribbon of mana in the middle of a test, so in the four months since our previous adventures with Ruby, she has come up with a solution to this very problem. She wove together two bags out of magic ribbons. One she keeps full of mana. While the other she uses as an extra-dimensional purse. It's so small that it fits in her back pocket and so big that she can store both her "crummy algebra" and "crummy biology" textbooks (her words, not mine) in it and still have room left over for lunch, an extra change of clothes, and pretty much anything else she wants to carry around. Those extra-dimensional purses sure make packing easy; and this was a good thing, because Ruby knew it was just a matter of time before she was going to go off on another adventure for The Dragon -- seeing as how she was the Consort and all (and that's pretty much what being the Consort meant).

And as long as we're going down Ruby's new equipment, we should also mention that she had also purchased a pair of really -- and I mean, really -- comfortable walking shoes. Why would Ruby feel the need to purchase really comfortable walking shoes you may ask? Well, the answer is simple. Ruby hadn't learned to fly as of yet and the adventures The Dragon sent her on tended to include an amazing amount of traveling, which basically meant walking, so comfortable shoes were a must.

And here I really should pause and make it exceedingly clear that the obvious marketing tie-in with Nifty brand shoes had been pointed out to Ruby -- like numerous times. I mean, she was Consort to The Dragon and she worked magic by a process of:

- A) Visualizing the solution,
- B) Figuring out the steps required to attain said solution,
- C) And then, doing them.

And just in case you didn't know it, Nifty's slogan was "Just do Them." It was an obvious marketing tie-in -- like a really, really, really obvious marketing tie-in -- but Ruby insisted that she wasn't going to sell out. Not now. Not ever.

Besides, Ruby wanted her footwear to be something a little more traditional, something a little more high-hard'ish, something a little combat-bootish, and something a little black (or maybe brown or blue or red). You know, something like the Martingale Endless Walker Boot™ for the discerning, traditional minded adventurer: guaranteed not to cause blisters, tire the feet, or need polishing for the first hundred thousand leagues. (Of course, it also bears mentioning that Martingale offered Ruby a ten percent overriding royalty and as Ruby's agent had explained, since Lady Ruby was now royalty she deserved every royalty she could get her hands on. Fame may be fleeting, but residual royalties last forever.)

Um, I seem to have gone down another diversionary tangent. But really, would you expect anything else during an algebra exam? OK, fair enough. That one was way over my head too. From now on, no more puns involving mathematical definitions. I promise.

I mean, as a starving author who only lives from fan letter to fan letter in the hopes that someday I might...

Backstabber,
You need to get your characters under control. I thought we had a deal!!!

This Ruby chick clearly can't tell a good shoe from a piece of crap low cost import.

The Sales Director at Nifty Shoes

Whoa there. It's only a marketing tie-in. No need to get personal. If you want your products featured in a future Dragon Bound collection, you're going to want to write your correspondence more like:

Amazing!

I work for Martingale's marketing department and I've never seen such a seamless marketing tie-in.

You must be the greatest author in all the Seven Realms.

Enclosed is a check, as per our agreement.

Keep up the good work.

DT

PS. We are willing to work the same deal on our Crumbarrel line.

Noble Sire, God of the Written Word

I must apologize for my predecessor's unwarranted outburst. Should it come to pass that Ruby's cheap import of a shoe loses its tread or that a shoestring should break at a critical juncture in Ruby's quest -- as so often happens with the inferior Martingale product line -- we would be more than happy to send via DDS (Dungeon Delivery Service) Immediate Delivery a new shoe, custom made to Rubies demanding specifications.

Did you know that Nifty shoestrings double as fifty foot ropes? Or that an enterprising author can earn a substantial bonus by working a Nifty shoe into his storyline? Even more if said shoe is used in a key plot development role?

As you can see from the enclosed check, valid upon inclusion of a Nifty shoe as a crucial story element, Nifty

offers a much more substantive incentive program than any of our competitors.

The New Marketing Director at Nifty

PS. Did you also know that we have a complete line of adventurer's clothing?

[Meanwhile, back in the story:]

Ruby was busy reaching into her back pocket to grab one of those pieces of manna that she keeps there just for emergencies like this. You know, an emergency like falling off a cliff, making a pair of magical eyeglasses so she can see through a disguise spell, or solving a particularly tricky algebra problem.

And as you may have guessed, once Ruby had the manna between her fingers, she cast a magical spell, which caused the test paper to be filled out with the correct answers. Well, more or less the correct answers. There was an art to this cheating thing. Ruby had to show her work and she knew her test would only be convincing if she included a few erasures and cross outs (as if she had gone down the wrong route to an incorrect answer a time or two). I mean, the first time Ruby had cheated, she had not shown her work and Mr. Thwartbridge had taken off points for that, but now she was a pro. Her test paper looked liked she had struggled with the problems, and only through sheer will, effort, and knowledge of algebra type minutia had she finally wrestled the solutions from her mind. She even had her hand automatically filling out the test form in real time like some sort of automation, so it was going to take a teacher a lot more observant and schooled in magic than Mr. Thwartbridge to catch Ruby cheating.

But the fact remains, Ruby cheated; and you can rest assured that before we get to the end of this here tale we will have shown that the only one she cheated was herself, because cheaters never prosper, etc., etc., etc..

Ruby didn't care, though. She was smart, usually conscientious, and for the most part liked school, but she didn't see the whole point to algebra. She had once asked Mr. Thwartbridge, "What's the point of algebra?"

To which he had responded, "To expand your mind, to learn."

"But why algebra? Why not something useful?"

"Algebra is useful."

"When am I ever going to use this stuff?"

"For college entrance exams."

"That's not a good reason," Ruby insisted. She had heard all of these arguments before. Taking algebra so you could get into college to learn more algebra was silly.

"If you want to be a doctor, you'll need algebra to pass organic chemistry. Most good jobs are like that," Mr. Thwartbridge continued.

"You know Mr. Thwartbridge," Ruby began slowly, for she had waited all week to get into this discussion with her teacher one more time. "I've been to the doctor a time or two, and they've never done anything resembling an algebra problem while I was there. What does $y=xb+6$ have to do with setting a broken bone?"

But then, Mr. Thwartbridge had had this discussion a time or two before in his life ($y=x^z-p^{dq} +/- .05^w$ times per semester at least and he'd been teaching for a number of years, so you do the math... because, like, I can't). But the math of it aside, all it really meant was that Mr. Thwartbridge had a response to Ruby's inquiry on the tip of his tongue just waiting to go. "I would think if you want the bone to be straight, you'd want y to equal x , or if you do a blood transfusion you'd definitely want your lipoids to be in the intersecting range of $y=x+2$ & $y=x^2$."

It probably was a good argument, but Ruby couldn't see the logic to it (and frankly neither could I). "But I'm not going to be a doctor," Ruby insisted. "When is this ever going to help me?"

"If you ever find yourself up against a thorny problem, you might want to take a shortcut. In which case remembering that

$x=0$ is the trivial answer to most anything of the form $y=ax^b+cx^d+ex^f+gx^h=0$ just might be helpful.”

“G is for Grt,” Grt said helpfully when he noticed that the letter g was in the equation. He was trying to help Mr. Thwartbridge for the next time he graded one of Grt’s papers. If he said it often enough, maybe the Troll would get it.

But Ruby wasn’t following any of this, so she didn’t really understand why Mr. Thwartbridge responded to Grt, “Hmm, an unnamed place holding variable, it might just work. That’s very clever Mr. Grt.”

“Grt smartees.”

Now, if you had read The Dragon Bound Quartet -- a book I would personally recommend buying, reading, and giving away as a present to everyone that you know as often as possible -- then you would know that The Dragon was happy to send his Consort off on dangerous missions all alone.

But one should not infer from this that The Dragon did not appreciate Ruby’s talents or care about her personal survival. Quite the contrary, The Dragon considered Ruby such a valuable asset that to insure her safety while in school he had sent two of his associates to protect her.

Like everyone else, Ruby had noticed both of her ‘bodyguards’ the very first day of school. How could she not? They were in each of her classes, always sat in the same seats, never paid any attention to the teachers, never had any clue as to what was going on, and they had wires coming out of their shirt collars that plugged into their ears like federal agents. Of course, they were wearing magic disguise spells in an effort to be discreet, but it didn’t really work. And so, on the first day of school, Ruby had cast a spell to see through the disguises and had learned that her bodyguards were Tring the Dour Dwarf and Steve the Ogre -- lovable characters from another book that I wrote, but at this point I’m just going to leave you guessing as to exactly which one. However, as it is important to the moment, I will simply say that

they both work in the bowels of the earth where they mine manna for a living.

Anyhow, as Ruby had never been satisfied with Mr. Thwartbridge's explanation for the usefulness of algebra, and seeing as how she figured that if anyone should know algebra it would be a mine operator, she had once asked Mr. Thwartbridge why a mine operator might need to know algebra. Ruby's motivation had been to find out if Tring would be inspired to learn the arcane art of algebra (and then maybe if he did, he could then teach it to her), or if he would find the subject as obtuse as Ruby did.

But I will not bore you with the details of that particular conversation. I mean, let's face it. As a writer of fantasy farces it's a safe bet I didn't get very far in school and that my employment opportunities are greatly curtailed by that very fact. In fact, if I had paid attention in algebra class, my writing possibilities might be endless. Possibly, right now, right this very moment, instead of writing a fantasy farce, I might be writing a science fiction farce! But I digress. The point is, neither Ruby, Tring, nor myself have ever been convinced by Mr. Thwartbridge's response -- though that might be due to the fact that none of us knew enough algebra to understand his response.

Anyhow, the upshot of all of this is that Ruby was in algebra class, and her hands were automatically completing the test with the correct answers -- something she'll pay for later in the book, because as we all know she was only cheating herself yada-yada. But for now she was bored. That was until she hit upon the idea of casting a spell so she could watch TV with her eyes closed.

It was a good idea. It was a clever idea. It was the type of idea that Mr. Thwartbridge would never hit upon because it had nothing to do with $X=Y$, or $e(x)dydx$, or anything having to do with putting letters together in funny ways that clearly have no meaning.

But still, there was one small snag to her brilliant plan. The only channel Ruby could get tuned-in onto the back of her eyelids was the news.

6

Professionalism

The scene opens onto a TV studio. Jeannette Stevens -- a breathtakingly beautiful Elf -- is sitting alone behind a news anchor desk. She waives off a Gnome who has been putting the finishing touches on her hair.

“Two minutes to air,” the announcer calls over the microphone.

And then, just as Jeannette is shuffling through the papers on her desk to settle her thoughts for the coming broadcast, an incredibly handsome, alluring, and mysterious figure enters the scene. Good looks, a sense of humor, and an impeccable writing style, the mysterious stranger -- a.k.a. me -- has come to co-anchor the news. And seeing as how he is wearing swim trunks, a loud Hawaiian print shirt, and beach flip-flops, it is obvious that he is dressed for success; while the three blue protuberances, which dangle beneath each of his ears, mark him as a firm believer in the Sp@ce Tr#k ideology of costume design. He -- once again, meaning I -- sits down next to Jeannette Stevens. And turning on the charm, he gazes deeply into the unfathomable depths of her crystal blue eyes.

“What in the name of Gra’gl are you doing?” Jeannette asks loudly as she glares at the mysterious stranger.

Undeterred, the suave heartthrob replies coolly, “This is my cameo.”

“Cameo?”

“All the great artists do it. Hitchy-baby, that Sc©rsey dude...”

“They make movies.”

“Movies. Books. Look, it’s all the same. It’s about making art, doing what you believe in...”

“Feeding your ego.”

“That’s harsh, baby. It’s about brand presence, name recognition. It’s about having fun with your art and sharing the experience with your readers...”

“Uh-hu,” an unconvinced -- yet still voluptuous -- Elvin maiden responds. “What is that stuff hanging from your ears?”

“Fishing worms. I taped them on.”

“You look stupid.”

“This is a written narrative. Not a lot of money is budgeted in your typical piece of pulp fiction for special effects. I had to dig into my own pocket for these worms, you know.”

“Fishing worms taped to your ears? You should have at least used clear tape.”

“Clear tape hurts when it comes off.”

“What are you supposed to be anyway?”

“I’m a Sectarian Celapod.”

“You have no idea what you just said, do you?”

“You know a Celapod? Like a Kreeel?”

“You mean Cephalopod?”

“Yeah, that’s it, a Blue Hexo Celaphopod with amazing charm-like powers.”

“You’re going to have to work on it,” Jeannette says as she goes back to shuffling her papers.

Interrupting the ensuing silence, moments later the set director calls out, “One minute to air.”

“OK. You’ve done your cameo,” Jeannette says as she tries to waive me off. “Now go.”

“No. I’m doing the news.”

Through clenched teeth Jeannette dares to disagree with the author and ultimate controller of her fate. “I work alone,” she hisses.

“Jeanne, baby, doll,” the author says as he patronizingly strokes the Elvin beauty’s hair. “With my control of the plot and your tantalizing good looks, we’d make a pretty good team. Think of the possibilities. I could write you into the major story line. You could accompany Ruby on her adventure.”

But not being a team player -- like at all -- Jeannette doesn’t even give the author’s fair and decent proposal a moment’s thought before she grabs the innocent author’s fingers and bends them backwards.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!”

“I work alone.” She says, before adding (perhaps more importantly), “And nobody touches my hair before air.” She then gives the author’s hand a final -- needlessly gratuitous -- twist before letting it go -- because, like, you know how she likes holding my hand.

For whatever reason, I somehow find the need to waive my hand in the air and blow on it while remarking, “You’re not much of a team player, are you?”

“Leave.”

“Thirty seconds to air,” comes the disembodied voice over the intercom.

“Leave now.”

“I don’t think you’re giving my offer the thought and consideration it deserves. I could work it so the plot requires you to do an exclusive expose on the Jamaican K’fr connection. You, me, the hot Jamaican sun... I think Crazy George has a time-share somewhere in the vicinity that we can borrow.”

“I already have a boyfriend.”

Looking through my notes -- or pretending that I have notes and therefore have the slightest idea of where the story is heading -- I talk softly as if to myself. “First we visit Ruby in school. Then I make a cameo appearance on the news wherein the major nemesis of the story is introduced. And then we cut to Jeannette Stevens apartment after work.” Turning to Jeannette I obligingly

offer, “It’s not a happy scene: betrayal, broken hearts. Trust me, you’re better off in Jamaica with me.”

Of course, Jeannette only interprets this generous offer as an excuse to utilize her trademarked style of settling professional differences with unprovoked physical abuse. As such, Jeannette grabs the author by his collar. “Leave my personal life out of this! This is sexual harassment, you know.”

After struggling -- unsuccessfully -- to loosen Jeannette’s strangling grip, I quite reasonably and rationally point out. “No, I think it’s called assault.”

“No,” Jeannette dares to disagree, “I’m pretty sure it’s called sexual harassment.”

“This coming from an Elf who’s bitten her way to the top?”

This remark makes her pause -- and good thing too -- because she’s got quite the grip.

“Five seconds to air.”

“Four. Three”

Being a professional, Jeannette takes the cue and lets go of the poor, humble -- undeserving of physical abuse -- author, as she coldly hisses at him, “Don’t say a word.”

“Two. One. And you’re live!”

“Welcome to the Jeannette Stevens Weekly Report. I’m Jeannette Stevens and this is my report.”

“And I’m the Happy Go-Lucky Celaphopod,” the Happy Go-Lucky Celaphopod interjects.

“I thought we agreed you’d shut up,” Jeannette hisses.

“I never really realized how much you hiss,” but whatever else your humble narrator had to say is cut short as the author’s face transforms into a hideous caricature of pain as Jeannette’s claw like nails dig deep into the bare flesh of his exposed thigh.

And as you might expect, without missing a beat, Jeannette merrily continues her broadcast. “This week we’ll be looking at rumors that the mystery meat in school lunches is really Centaur,

whether Hazen Crot hair treatments cause cancer, and if Kreels are for Real or simply Emotional Vampires. But first, we have an in depth report on why three wishes is never enough.”

“Those are all great stories,” a smug author notes dismissively. But as Jeannette reaches over with her nails to silence the author again, she nearly falls over. Because -- you see -- knowing of Jeannette’s violent temper-tamper inclined ways, the author took the liberty of sneaking into the studio last night and loosened all of the bolts holding the chairs down. And as she was talking, he slid his chair those precious six extra inches away from the clawing reach of the glamorous beauty. “Sometime we should get together over a candle lit dinner and talk about making your wishes come true.”

As you might well imagine, Jeannette ignores the author’s sincere, heartfelt offer and instead calls to the producer, “Roll tape!”

“I think the booth might be having technical difficulties,” I helpfully advise her -- like the kind, sweet, thoughtful person that I am.

And -- as if the word of the author needed confirmation -- the producer, booth guy, or whatever the guy up there is called takes this opportunity to chirp over the intercom, “We’re having technical difficulties, Jeannette. You’re going to have to wing it.”

“You sabotaged my show?” the callus Elvin woman shrieks in outrage.

“Yo. Dog!” I say, trying out my newly invented tag line while shaking my blue dangling lobes in that sexy way that I have. But not being with it, Jeannette doesn’t seem to appreciate my witty repartee. Instead she tries to attack me, again! So -- needless to say -- I have to jump out of my chair to avoid her unwarranted assault. I don’t mind so much, though. Standing out of arms reach is usually how I approach my dates. So undeterred, I try again, “Three wishes, baby. I’m the author. This story can go any way I want it too.”

“I can see I’m not going to be able to do my report,” Jeannette concedes. “But as a public service, I feel compelled to point out that wishes from fantasy authors fall far behind those provided by either Demons or Devils in customer satisfaction.”

“Yo. Dog!” I say in dismay as I dangle my lobes once again. But really, what else is there to say? She’s right. If my wish granting abilities were any good, Jeannette would not have spent the past three minutes gouging my leg with her talon sharp claws.

Once again, moments pass. Jeannette is staring at me -- staring, glaring, deciding if she can cross the distance to where I am standing before I can run away. “You had a purpose -- I hope -- for destroying my show,” she finally hisses.

“Yo. Dog! It doesn’t have to be this way,” I insist, while -- once again -- dangling my blue fishing-lure lobes in the way that all the girls find seductive.

“Just do your thing and leave.”

“You’re really coping a bad attitude. I have major late breaking news planned for your show. It’s the kind of stuff they give the Putzer Award for. You should be thanking me for bringing this story to you and your show.”

Not entirely convinced -- or even convinced to the slightest degree -- but nonetheless, after another moment of silence, Jeannette finally asks with the kind of insincere sarcasm that only a High Elf who has gone to Journalism School can muster, “So are you going to tell us this important late breaking news or not?”

“Oh, right. It’s the Good to be Alive Happy Celebration Day Festival in the Sm©rk™ vortex.”

“It’s always the Good to be Alive Happy Celebration Day Festival in the Sm©rk™ vortex,” Jeannette remarks. “Where’s the news in that?”

“Well, we’ve got a field reporter there today,” the author announces smugly, and then after a brief pause asks of Jeannette, “What do you call the guy in the booth, anyway?”

“Carl.”

“Not Carl the Cool Chromium Creature or Carl the Cobalt?”

“Its just Carl,” Jeannette hisses as if it was the hardest line she’d ever had to say in her entire life.

“Carl,” I say shaking my lobes. “Yo. Dog! We’ve got a feed on Satellite One.”

“Coming at ya, big guy,” Carl replies helpfully as he gives me a big thumbs up, flicks the switch, and loads the satellite feed. Carl knows where his paycheck comes from. Wishes from authors who write fantasy farces might not be worth the pulp paper they’re printed on, but Carl -- Carl the Courteous Cobalt -- he knows you don’t have a future in this series until you’re given a name. Besides, this blue lobed idiot is clearly out of control and the odds in the booth are even money that Jeannette will bite him before the end of the first news segment. Carl had seen what she’d done to Brad (see The Dragon Bound Quartet for the full story) and so he knows it’s only a matter of time before Jeannette turns those gleaming white razor sharp Elvin teeth on someone else. And Carl doesn’t want to be that someone else. If that Celaphopod dude keeps it up, he’s going to get bitten for sure. I mean, you’d think being the narrator and all that this Go-Lucky Celaphopod would know better. But he’s a fantasy author, and like the rest of his kind, maybe he’s just plain stupid.

Stupid? Hmm, now that word brings to mind another character we (meaning those of us who have read The Dragon Bound Quartet a full half dozen times) all know and love. Stupid: next to that word in the dictionary is a picture of Jim the Werewolf. And speaking of Jim the Werewolf, listen -- if you will -- as his voice echoes through the studio.

“Am I live? Hello? Can you hear me? Hello? Hello? Hello?”

“Yes Jim,” Jeannette responds coldly. “We can hear you.”

“O-ow-hoooo, Jeannette! This is Jim the Werewolf.”

“Yo. Dog! A big Ya-woo! Right back at you,” the Celaphopod offers as he jumps in.

“It’s O-ow-hoooo! Not wahoo,” Jeannette supplies with obvious irritation. “If you’re going to do the inane witty repertoire bit with Jim, at least do it right. How hard is it to cut and paste the right word?”

“Yo. Dog!” I say in that adorable little way that I have, as I dangle my lobes and diplomatically scoot my chair to the middle of the studio where -- hopefully -- I will be safe from the maniacal Elf. She wants me, you know.

“You’re the author. We can all hear your thoughts as if you’re speaking them out loud.”

(Even if I put them in parenthesis, I wonder to myself.)

“Yes, even if you put them in parenthesis.”

Or italics?

“Yes! Or italics! And while we’re on the subject, let me lay to rest any delusional belief you might hold that I want you. I don’t want you. In fact, the only thing I can ever remember wanting from you was for you to shut up and leave me alone.”

(It’s good to want things, the author thinks to himself, wondering if the double italic/parenthesis whammy might do any good at insulating his thoughts.)

“No. It doesn’t. And from here on out, I’m going to pretend that I can’t hear you,” Jeannette declares.

(And let’s all just see how long that lasts.)

“Shut up,” Jeannette hisses, yet again, before turning her attention to Jim. She is a highly paid journalistic professional, after all. And although the author might be an idiot with fishing lures taped to his ears, he probably had some sort of reason for wanting Jim to broadcast live from the Good to be Alive Happy Celebration Day Festival in the Sm©rk™ vortex. “What’s going on in Sm©rk™ Land today Jim?”

“O-ow-hoooo!”

“Yes, O-ow-hoooo! Jim. What’s going on in Sm©rk™ Land? Is anything special happening at the festival today?”

“O-ow-hoooo?”

“THE FESTIVAL JIM!” bellows the enraged Elf -- who would probably be a lot more calm and relaxed if she just went out with the author after the show for a nice romantic dinner...

“Shut Up! And I’m warning you, I’m not going to tell you again...”

(Fat chance on that, I’m thinking.)

“Shut up! Jim, your report!”

(See, I told you she’d tell me to shut up again.)

While Jim responds, “O-ow-hoooo! Should I talk or shut up? You’re not being very clear, Jeannette. In fact, you’re sending me very mixed signals. One minute it’s ‘Tell me your report.’ And the next it’s ‘Shut up.’ I can see why Celli is so confused.”

“Celli is confused because he is an idiot! Now, for the love of Gra’gl, Jim, tell us what’s so important about this Sm©rk™ Happy Joy Day Festival or I’m going to take Cela-boy up on his offer and use one of my wishes to turn you into a Sm©rk™ -- a nice, small, bite size Sm©rk™.”

“Uh, the thing is we got lost on the way there, Jeannette. O-ow-hoooo?”

“I don’t think that’s possible. Throw up a picture there, Carl the Courteous Cobalt,” the author says magnanimously, because -- after all -- the author really is a great guy.

“Shut up,” Jeannette hisses, yet again.

And you know, I never really thought about it before, but you know how saying O-ow-hoooo is Jim’s tag-line? Maybe saying Shut Up is Jeannette’s tag-line?

And just between you (the reader) and me, although this would be a great time to see how many times I could get Jeannette to say ‘Shut Up’ and really lock that in as her tag-line, I’ve got other things to consider at the moment -- like the story.

“Yes, getting back to the story would be nice,” Jeannette has to admit.

But it’s not to be. Because breaking into the author’s thoughts like that, yet again, only causes him wonder, “If you can hear me think, can you hear the other characters think, as well?”

“No, only you.”

Hmm. Well, that’s something to think about.

But before he could (think about it), the feed finally comes through interrupting the author’s endlessly rambling thoughts and returning us to the story -- already in progress.

The television feed shows a black, desolate, war-scorched, barren plain. It is highly reminiscent of the Eastern Orcin Front, the Western Goblin Front, the Northern Goblin Front, and/or the Southern Orcin Front. Which is to say, smoke billows up from the charred remains of what was once a white cottage, its broken used-to-be-white picket fence has obviously seen better days -- as have, presumably, all the blue globs of melted putty which dot the landscape.

And for those of you not in the know, I should point out that Sm©rks™ were a popular pocket-charm item in the not too distant past. There was Papa Sm©rk™, Mama Sm©rk™, Baking Sm©rk™, Knitting Sm©rk™, Gag Me With A Spoon Sm©rk™, and Gee Don’t All Sm©rks™ Look Pretty Much Alike Sm©rk™. Of course, all you really need to know about Sm©rks™ for our purposes is that they looked like blue chewing gum -- only they weren’t as tasty and they didn’t get stuck in the treads of your shoes if you stepped, stomped, or jumped on them. Really, they didn’t. It didn’t matter how hard you tried. They were made out of some sort of super indestructible plastic polymer that kept the Sm©rks™ as good as new no matter how many times they were hit with a hammer or run over with the family car. Heat was about the only thing that could do a Sm©rk™ in -- say from a soldering iron, not that I would know for certain...

Anyway, with that little history lesson behind us, let’s return to the field of carnage, which just so happens to be strewn liberally with the melted remains of Sm©rks™.

“This is the right place,” the Happy Go-Lucky Celaphopod -- and self-appointed ace reporter -- remarks gleefully from the

relative safety of the news room. “See right over there is the Sm©rk™ house. It’s in smoking Sm©rk™ ruins just like it usually is. And over there is Melted Sm©rk™. Oh, and there’s Staring At The Sun Through A Magnifying Glass Sm©rk™. And there’s Spontaneous Combustions Sm©rk™. And Playing With Matches Sm©rk™. Oh! And that one is Left On The Car Dashboard Sm©rk™ -- I always liked him. And that one is Put Through the Dryer Sm©rk™. And over there? Well, that one just looks like a dog chewed on it.”

“O-ow-hoooo! This place reeks of burnt plastic.”

“Ah, I love the smell of burnt plastic in the morning. It smells like... like... victory.”

“O-ow-hoooo! Reminds me of the time I reenacted a napalm attack with my plastic army man collection.”

“Yo. Dog! Or the time Action Man got interrogated on the family Bar-B-Q.”

“O-ow-hoooo! Is it safe Action Man? O-ow-hoooo! Is it safe?”

“Yo. Dog! That was great. Burned him to a crisp and he had no idea what I was talking about. Is it safe? ‘What?’ Is it safe? ‘What?’ Classic.”

“O-ow-hoooo!”

“Yo. Dog!”

“Ahem!” Jeannette breaks in with obvious disgust. “If you two Neanderthals are done with your reminisces into the late Kretenous period, which was evidently your childhood, can we get on with the news?”

“Yo. Dog!”

“Yo this!” Jeannette helpfully suggests (trying out a new tag-line, I suppose), “The News?”

After a moment of internal deliberation while pretending to shuffle through his notes, the author concedes that, “There must be a survivor,” and mysteriously -- as if on cue, as if the author did in

fact have some awesome wish granting powers -- a nervous looking Sm©rk™ cautiously emerges from behind the cottage.

“O-ow-hoooo! There’s a survivor.”

At which outburst, the Sm©rk™ skitters back around the building.

“Yo. Dog! You scared him.”

“What’s the point of all this anyhow? Is this some sort of twisted way to relive some sick childhood fantasy?” Jeannette asks.

“Yo. Dog! You hurt me when you say things like that.”

“What’s the point?” Jeannette asks again. “The Sm©rks™ are kind, loving, thoughtful creatures.”

“Don’t tell me you collected Sm©rks™ as a child.”

“I had some.”

“O-ow-hoooo!” Jim remarks. “Had is right. There’s none left.”

“So what’s the point?” Jeannette asks almost teary eyed.

“The Great Sm©rk™ Land is destroyed, and Papa Sm©rk™ won’t be telling stories to Baby Sm©rk™ any more. You guys are sick.”

“You say that like I did this,” the author responds as a hurt look spreads across his features. He’s been taking acting lessons, you know, in preparations for the cameo in the upcoming movie, and as such, he almost looks convincing. “This isn’t my doing. I’m a helpless bystander to this carnage just like everyone else. I’m an innocent chronicler of the events...”

“As they unfold in your mind.”

“You know, this was all addressed in the first book. As a writer, I don’t have definitive control (or even much control) over the happenings in any of the vortexes I create (much less the ones I’m merely visiting). I mean, talk to anybody who has sold off the movie rights to their book and they’ll back me up on this.”

“Fine. I’ll let it go. I’m sure you’re a nice, pleasant guy whenever you’re not offing another helpless fantasy race. Being a psychopath is just a part time thing for you.”

“Right. Exactly. Hey, wait a minute!”

“Don’t get your knickers in a bind. I think you were getting ready to tell us the point of all this.”

“Oh, right.”

And it would be right about here that the author pauses to scratch his chin, just like he usually does whenever he has written himself into a corner and needs to take a minute to think about what to do next. But the Elvin vixen does not want to wait. “The point of all this Psycho-Pod Boy.”

And you know, now that I think about it, this would be like a really -- really, really -- great place for a chapter break.

“What’s the point?” the Elvin vixen insists, but her voice drowns off into the distance as the author scrambles to review his notes. He must have had some reason -- no matter how trivial -- for killing off the Sm©rk™ love menace. Didn’t he?

7

The Hard Part is Making it Look Easy

“We’re back from commercial in five seconds,” echoes the helpful voice of Carl the Courteous Cobalt throughout the studio. With a wife, family, mortgage, and bills to pay Carl needs all the face time he can get in this story. “I could come down there,” he offers helpfully as his voice booms through the intercom again. “Maybe bring you some hot chocolate, hook up a wire, or something.”

Yes, Carl was helpful... and courteous. Maybe he could come down here, bring a cup of cocoa, and hook up a wire. Or maybe, he could go off on a dangerous adventure. There really wasn’t enough death among the bit characters in the Dragon Bound series. Someone had to die to make death seem like a possibility, to build up the tension and the suspense -- much like one of those red shirted guys on Sp@ce Tr#k. And although Carl has only been around for a chapter or so, and even though he hasn’t yet made an onscreen appearance, the author is pretty sure that Carl has worn a

red plaid shirt to work today. Yes. That's it. Carl could accompany Ruby as she goes on her quest and he could die early -- maybe fall into a pit or something -- and set the tone for the rest of the adventure. The author will -- of course -- have to clear Carl's death benefits with accounting before it's a go; but other than that, the plan sounds rock solid.

Needless to say, the author's thoughts echo loudly around the otherwise quiet news studio, hanging heavy in the air.

"Um, I just remembered, it's against union rules for a producer to show his face onscreen," Carl suddenly announces as he hastily removes a red plaid shirt that had arrived anonymously in yesterday's mail.

That was an expensive shirt! Removing the shirt and refusing to walk onscreen were both blatant -- not to mention cowardly -- attempts by Carl to save his own hide. But more importantly, it was an expensive shirt! "How can I write the shirt off as a business expense if it doesn't appear in the story?" the author wonders quietly to himself... or not so quietly as the case may be.

However for his part, Carl is silent and remains hidden off screen -- apparently happy to ignore the author's monetary problems and the fickleties of literature tax law. Yes, Carl the Cowardly (if Courteous) Cobalt is a shrewd one. After only his second reference in the story, he already has the longest name in the series. And unlike Art'ung-What'ever, most of the readers will probably actually remember Carl's name. It's an important fact that the marketing department will need to look into. But as the author is biding his time and secretly trying to decide whether it would be best to simply end this bit by quietly killing Carl off screen, Carl proves himself to be clever as well. Yes, being proactive in regards to his own fate Carl the Clever, Cowardly, and Courteous Cobalt takes the initiative, and in an attempt to save his own wretched hide suddenly announces, like without any warning whatsoever, "We're back from commercial. You're live."

Even so, before we resume with the newscast, it should be noted that one thing has become exceedingly clear: Carl the Clever -- if Cowardly yet Courteous -- Cobalt's name has gotten far -- far -- too long. Something needs to be done -- and quick -- about either the name or the character... or quiet possibly both!!!

When the echoing reverb of the narrator's voiceover finally fades away, Jeannette Stevens -- the friskiest Elf in the news business -- takes up the slack. "That must have been the longest commercial break in the history of television. What was that? Three weeks?"

"I'm sure Carl will back me up. It was a standard sixty second commercial break. Yo. Dog! How long were we off air?"

Carl the CCC not wanting to become Carl the De-CCC-eased quickly agrees, "It was sixty seconds on the nose, Jeannette. The blue lobed guy is right." As usual.

"Yo. Dog!" I say once again, as I flap my lobes about. And just between you and me, I can tell that Jeannette is weakening in her resolve. In another scene or two, the lovely Elvin vixen and myself will be sipping wine, toasting our...

"In your dreams," Jeannette announces as she breaks into my reverie.

"Yo. Dog! In my books," I correct her.

"Whatever. And whatever you might tell your audience, it's been three weeks. So after nearly a month, what did you come up with? Why exactly did you wipe out the Sm©rks™ again?"

"Jim! Jim! Yo. Dog! Jim!"

"You've been waiting three weeks to write that haven't you?"

"Um yeah, because it's very, very clever. You see, Jim is a Werewolf, and so 'Yo. Dog' is just the perfect sort of idle chit chat in which to engage him."

Not appreciating the finer points of my craft, Jeannette simply rolls her eyes, and so what am I to do, but to say, "Yo. Dog! Jim, you out there?" one more time.

"O-ow-hoooo! Celaphopod," Jim finally answers.

“Yo. Dog! Try to see if you can get an interview with that Sole Sm©rk™ Survivor,” the Last of the Sm©rks™, the Hermit Sm©rk™, the Desert Island Sm©rk™; They Killed Your Family, Ruined Your Crops, and Destroyed Everything You Worked Your Whole Life For Sm©rk™, and now all you Live For is Revenge Sm©rk™, that sort of Sm©rk™. “See if you can get an interview with him. It would be an exclusive,” the Celaphopod informs Jeannette, but she seems to have stopped listening for the moment. She’s got a short attention span when it comes to mindless rants.

Oddly, Sole Survivor Sm©rk™ does not wish to be interviewed at the moment -- at least not by a hyperactive Werewolf who keeps on yelling “O-ow-hoooo!” at the top of his lungs whenever he gets within earshot of the Sm©rk™. But Jim is a professional field reporter, and so he finally chases the Sm©rk™ down, tackles him when he’s within reach, and drags him back to the front of the smoldering white cottage -- mainly because the Gnome operating the camera off-screen has assured everyone that this is the location that offers the best “bang for you buck” in terms of visual imagery. Besides, it just sort of looks cool -- the desolate plain, the smoldering remains of Sm©rk™ Central in the background, and Jim struggling with the terrified Sole Survivor Sm©rk™ in the foreground.

“O-ow-hoooo! Celaphopod,” Jim howls as the terrified Sm©rk™ tries to bolt once again, but -- being the professional -- Jim has a firm grasp on the Sm©rk™’s shoulder. And just in case you’re not familiar with the cute little guys (or it’s been like three weeks since you read the last chapter), Sm©rks™ typically look like they are made out of blue Play-Duh! and favor giant marshmallows for hats. This little tyke is no different, but he has opted to cover his face with charcoal streaks, just like the type used on the best of movie sets to indicate that the character has gone through a harrowing experience and has only just barely escaped with their lives. In keeping with this theme, the Sm©rk™ before

us has hollow vacant eyes, has a jittery, nervous countenance, and is looking all around -- every which way -- constantly. Oh, and just in case you like your characters fully fleshed out, he also has trouble sleeping at nights, has constant flashbacks to the “incident”, lacks an appreciable appetite, is unable to concentrate on even the simplest of tasks, and refuses to sit with his back to any door. He also feels naked without an AK-47/5889x in his hands or a Bo-Knee Disemboweler knife in his belt while fireworks, Bar-B-Q’s, cigarette lighters, the smell of hay, and mentions of Happy-Happy Good to Be Alive Festival’s send him into a combative flashback where all he wants to do is run and hide. Which is to say, this little guy is PTSD Sm©rk™ and he is not forgotten.

“O-ow-hoooo! Sm©rk™ Dude!”

“What? Where? Are they here?” PTSD Sm©rk™ asks anxiously as he looks around and struggles against Jim’s grip. “They’re coming. I’ve go to man the love cannon.”

“Yo. Dog! I think he’s having a flashback,” the Celaphopod helpfully points out.

“O-ow-hoooo!”

As this witty exchange takes place, the Sm©rk™ struggles in vain against Jim’s iron hard grip. But it being in vain, he gets nowhere. Nowhere, that is, until he -- completely un-Sm©rk™-like -- kicks Jim in the nards.

“O-ow-hoooo!”

The attack brings Jim to his knees. And upon securing his freedom, the Sm©rk™ runs around to the rear of the cottage where he somehow manages to climb onto the roof. “Man the Love Cannons!” the Sm©rk™ yells as the battle is recreated in his mind’s eye for all to see. “Use the Feel Good Ray,” he calls out while urging on his imaginary fellow Sm©rks™. “Throw them a warm fuzzy. Give them a bunch of flowers.” But his voice is wavering. He puts his hands over his eyes. “Give them a hug. Tell them they’re worthwhile. Do something nice...” But he can take no more. His voice trails off. And then his advice takes a

different form, “Run! Run! Drop the loaves, Baker Sm©rk™. Put down your bricks, Masonry Sm©rk™. Run! Run! Run!” and then thinking better of it, he yells, “Hide! Hide! Hide!” but opening his eyes he realizes that there are not any Sm©rks™ left to take his advice. Grief stricken, he slumps down onto the roof of the cottage and starts to cry.

“This is sad,” remarks Jeannette -- the Elf with the heart of gold.

“Yo. Dog! This is news,” remarks the Celaphopod -- a creature who is incidentally rumored to have no heart -- so really, it should come as no surprise when he pushes the interview forward by asking, “What do you see PTSD Sm©rk™?”

“No, don’t make him relive it,” Jeannette begs. Who would have thought the Elf with the razor sharp teeth would care?

But the Celaphopod is understanding of her concerns. “Yo. Dog! I heard somewhere that reliving the traumatic event can sometimes help dissolve the emotional trauma.”

“I’m sure they meant in an emotional supportive environment,” Jeannette counters.

“Really, I find it hard to believe this is really you talking, Jeannette. In The Dragon Bound Quartet, weren’t you the one who wanted to make a little girl cry on national TV,” (i.e. Ruby), “just because you thought it would be good for your ratings?”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“She wasn’t a Sm©rk™.”

“Fine, if you think I’m being callous and cold hearted about all of this, then you interview the Sm©rk™. Find out what attacked Sm©rk™ Land. And maybe find out why?”

Jeannette the caring and nurturing Elf -- and personally, I’m guessing this change of heart is only going to last a line or two...

“I can be caring,” the lovable Elf insists as she claws at the Celaphopod.

“See! What did I tell you? She’s just a time bomb waiting to go off,” the author remarks as he lurches defensively out of the co-anchor chair and away from the maniacal elf as he narrowly escapes the talon like claws of the hormonally imbalanced -- and quite possibly love-sick -- Elf. “Yo. Dog! Just do the interview. This is not time to be fondling my thighs, you kinky elf, you.”

...

[Um, I’m just going to delete this part.]

And we can resume when Jeannette has regained her composure and is cooing to the little Sm©rk™ over the satellite feed, “Sm©rk™. Little Sm©rk™, don’t be afraid. Everything is going to be alright.”

“No. No, it’s not. Baker Sm©rk™ is not going to be baking bread ever again. Gardener Sm©rk™ doesn’t have any flowers -- the flower beds are all gone, and so is he,” and wouldn’t you know it? With that outburst, PTSD Sm©rk™ starts to cry.

“Give him a hug Jim,” Jeannette instructs our fearless Werewolf field reporter.

“Didn’t you just see him kick me in the nards? I’m not going anywhere near that little blue devil.”

“Give him a hug!” Jeannette screams in the frantic rage that we have all come to know and love... “And you, shut up!”

Yes, well. Seeing as how he is between the proverbial Rock and the Homicidal Elf, Jim starts to hesitantly inch his way towards the Sm©rk™, but there is no need for fear. It is all the Sm©rk™ can do to fall into Jim’s arms as he proceeds to cry uncontrollably. “It was awful,” the Sm©rk™ sniffles. “They came out of nowhere. We thought they just wanted to join us for the Happy Good to Be Alive Thank Gra’gl I’m a Sm©rk™ Day Celebration, but they didn’t. We thought they were riding fast so they wouldn’t be late for the opening parade, and so we started singing the welcome song to reassure and welcome them, but as soon as they got close enough they just started slashing and slaying

with their swords: big swords, great big gigantic swords of doom infused with mystical Sm©rk™ killing powers. It was awful.”

“O-ow-hoooo!” Jim howls in a comforting voice like only a Werewolf can do as he seeks to sooth the frayed nerves of the emotionally distraught PTSD Sm©rk™.

Of course, being the professional -- and smelling a Putzer in the offing, or whatever they call that stupid award these days --Jeannette is quick to urge Jim on. “Ask the Sm©rk™ what the riders looked like.”

“They were horse riders,” PTSD Sm©rk™ supplies helpfully. “Ghostly apparitions of death and doom on horseback. They carried swords, axes, hatchets, and all manner of cutlery, but it was the one with the AK-47/5889x using the beam weapon attachment, which caused the most damage. They melted everyone... even Shoemaker Sm©rk™!” and with this PTSD Sm©rk™ starts to bawl helplessly again.

“Yo. Dog! That is just awful.”

“What are you talking about? This is your doing,” the bitter Elvin news anchorwoman says as she -- yet again -- wrongly accusing the helpless fantasy writer of wrongdoing.

“Don’t give me that crap!” Jeannette retorts. “The Sm©rk™ are loving, friendly creatures. What did they ever do to deserve this?”

Um, that’s a good question.

Thinking quickly, the author looks through his stack of notes and finding the appropriate piece of paper hands it over to Jeannette.

“What’s this suppose to be?” she asks with obvious disdain. “It’s a blank piece of paper.”

“Just play along. It’s a prop,” the Celaphopod urges.

“Great, it explains everything,” Jeannette says shaking her head in disbelief.”

“Well, I like to think that it explains it all. But it’s sort of subtle so bear with me.”

“Do you mean subtle? Or stupid?”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No, so just be quiet my Goddess of Love,” and then after lurching out of the way to escape her raking claws, the author continues. “As we all know, love, happiness and good cheer are the number one exports of Sm©rk™ Land. And ever since the Consort outlawed weapons, the Sm©rks™ have been one of the biggest suppliers to military in all the Seven Realms. Did you know that most Love Bombs are stuffed full of love manufactured, packaged, and exported by the Sm©rk™’s? Look at any high quality Warm Fuzzy made in the last sixteen years and odds are it will have a Made in Sm©rk™ Land sticker on the back. I mean, do you realize that the most effective defensive measure ever developed against the Goblins on the Eastern Front is a giant TV screen, which the Warlord Clint Grave set up to show the Sm©rk™’s Saturday morning TV show in a never ending loop. The Goblins would literally rather throw themselves on their own spears than get within a quarter mile of that screen and be forced to watch that show. And every day the TV is pushed forward another yard. It’s the best progress that’s been made on the Eastern Front in a thousand years.”

“Like I thought. That’s just stupid.”

“Yo. Dog! The truth is harsh. It’s really the only way you can explain the popularity of escapist fiction.”

(Yuck. Yuck.)

“You haven’t answered anything yet,” Jeannette wisely observes. My but she is a smart one. “Why did you wipe out the Sm©rks™?”

“Um, well. Really, it’s not so much about the Sm©rks™ as it is about the riders. They’re going to be the bad guys in the upcoming story, you know, the underlying reason why The Dragon is going to send Ruby on another adventure.”

“So, let me get this straight. You wiped out the entire Sm©rks™ vortex, just so you could introduce a nemesis into your

story,” Jeannette summarizes succinctly in what can only be described as a judgmental tone.

“Yo. Dog! At least I didn’t try to make the Sm©rk™ cry.”

“No, you just killed everyone he knew.”

“It’ll make him stronger.”

Fair enough, that last line could be too obscure. After all, how many readers can be expected to remember Dark Portent’s philosophical cornerstone as painstaking hammered home in The Dragon Bound Quartet. The point is, the Sm©rk™ has his life, and if you discount that whole lack of being able to sleep thing, the eating disorder, and a severe case of PTSD -- which will probably bring on high blood pressure, a heart condition, and an early death -- the Sm©rk™ has his health too, so he pretty much has everything, right? Anyway, I’m sure he’ll bounce back in a few hours.

“Whatever,” Jeannette says, curtly dismissing my analysis.

“Do you have a name for these horsemen?”

“I was thinking of like the four horsemen of D©©m -- you know, for a little Mt. D©©m tie-in.”

“Great. Some sort of stupid Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse pun.” Jeannette pulls a piece of paper at random from my pile, and then talking directly to the reader -- which is really only something the author is supposed to do -- she says, “Two can play at that game:

“This just in. The Four Horsemen of D©©m, major character nemeses and plot device for the Minataur Tails: to wit one Horseman Pale, Pestilence; one Horseman Black, Desolation; one Horseman White, Death; and one Horseman Red, Slaughter: in a surprise move issued a joint statement indicating extreme regret for their part in the destruction of Sm©rk™ Land. The Pale Horseman in particular stated that it really wasn’t as much fun as he had expected saying, ‘As usual Slaughter and Desolation went overboard.’ It was a bad joke and they were sorry. They promised not to do it again. End of Story.”

You have to hand it to Jeannette, that's the type of quick thinking and decisive action that got the nimble Elf her own television show. Sadly, only the author can make major plot elements happen by writing -- or in this case reading -- them into the story. So basically, when Jeannette does it, it is merely bad reporting.

"Yo. Dog! It's really unethical to be broadcasting that misinformation. I mean, those riders are psychotic. They're not going to stop just because you make-up a phony news report."

And then continuing, the Celaphopod takes on a sarcastic tone, which I feel the need to highlight on account of how it may be difficult for some readers to differentiate my normal level of sarcasm with the heightened level of sarcasm the following passage has.

"Do you really think BrokeClaw never tried to open his news broadcast with, 'In a surprise twist today, folks in the Middle East realized it would be better if we all just got along. Mr. Psychotic Terrorist was quoted as saying, 'I was playing with my Terrorist Sm©rks™ this morning when suddenly I heard him speaking to me. He said, 'Today is Happy Happy Joy Good To Be Alive And Love All People No Matter How Much Allah Hates Them Day.' So, I said to myself, 'If my Sm©rk™ buddy can love the hated infidels, then so can I.' It was the push the peace talks needed,' BrokeClaw continued. 'I just hope we can follow their good example. I'm John BrokeClaw and today I'm proud to be a Human.' It just really seems unlikely," I finish with a bit of extraneous commentary as the last of the interior quotes fall away -- and Gra'gl save me if I ever have to punctuate anything like that again -- because even I can't follow that mangled mash of nested quotations.

"Are you finished?" Jeannette asks curtly.

"I know it sounds trite, but you look good even when you're upset. Anyhow, the real thing is, I was thinking about calling the riders the Four Horsemen of D©©m, but then I changed my mind."

“You’re an idiot,” Jeannette succinctly surmises.

“The Sm©rk™ has PTSD. I’ve got that Peter Pan thing.”

“O-ow-hoooo! You’re a fairy?” Jim pipes in.

“No, an inability to commit, to a marriage, a plot, whatever,” but don’t think the author is going to forget that little joke, Jim-Bo. Fairy, huh? I’ll get him, but until I figure out exactly how, I might as well take this opportunity to finish explaining -- what it is I was trying to explain. “You see, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse has been done to death.”

Get it? Fine, don’t laugh.

Anyway, “I wanted something a little more original for my story. Something the fantasy world had never seen before. Something like ghost riders, death skeleton riders, or some other nasty ghoulish thing.”

“Nasty Ghouls?” Jeannette echoes doubtfully. “Do you mean NAS-gh©uls™?”

“Exactly! And just so you know, the NAS-gh©uls™ didn’t stop at Sm©rk™ Land. I’ve got Brad the Zombie on the second satellite feed and he’s in the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex for their Aren’t You Lucky You’ve Got A Bazillion Tr©ll-Tr©ll™’s On Your Desk Festival,” which coincidentally takes place every day as well. “Do you have Brad on feed two Carl?”

“I got the feed, but Brad says he’s not there yet. He’s says he got lost. Must of took a wrong turn somewhere because he’s in a smoky barren field with only piles of what look to be used pink chewing gum dotting the landscape.”

“Oh, he’s in the right place,” the Celaphopod beams happily.

But Jeannette only says, “I don’t think we need to do this again,” as she tries her best to ruin yet another good bit. But it won’t work because the show must go on.

“Yo. Dog!”

“Y’rg,” replies Brad, the lovable Zombie with the voice impediment.

“O-ow-hoooo!” interjects Jim.

While the Celaphopod gamely announces, “Yo. Dog! This is fun.”

Jeannette on the other hand -- always the spoil sport -- rudely interrupts with, “Yo, Fool! I thought I had my own show?”

“Yo. Dog! Isn’t it fun to have the gang all together again?”

“Fine. Great. Big happy reunion. Yada, yada,” Jeannette replies in her killjoy voice. “The NAS-gh©uls™ destroyed Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ Land, too. Any other nice charming innocent fantasy worlds you want to destroy? Or can we just get on with the story?”

“You want me to move it along?”

“Yes.”

“OK. You heard her, guys. Word on the street is that the Nasty-Ghouls are headed for a small farming community in the south of Wales. I think it would be great fun if Jim and Brad were to go and try to get an interview with them.”

“O-ow-hoooo! I’m sorry about the fairy thing. Come on, it was a joke.”

“What are you talking about? Brad’s a Zombie. Jim, you’re a Werewolf. I mean, the NAS-gh©uls™ and you are all creatures of the night. You got that blood-bond, social outcast thing going. I bet you’ll get that crazy monster-magic chemistry working in no time and it’ll be like reuniting with your old childhood chums. Odds are they’ll open right up and tell you their life story.”

“Y’rg, dude,” Brad the Zombie dares to contradict, “They’ll’rg gut us lik’rg pig’rgs.”

“Yo. Dog! Have some faith in me. I’ll call their publicist and try to work something out. Just be sure to wave a white flag and wear something bright orange that says ‘Reporter’ on it and you’ll be Fine.”

Yeah, right. That’ll work.

Call me a fairy. Ha. Ha. Ha. Big joke. I’ll show you.

“Y’rg! We’rg can hear’rg you’g!”

Well, then I shouldn’t say anything more...

A Rare Moment of Silence

“Are we done here?” Jeannette asks as she looks at her watch. “30,000 minutes and running, this must be the longest hour-long show I’ve ever done.”

“You should be grateful. I would have thought that you’d like the exposure.”

“I’m tired. I just want to go home and take a nice long bath.”

“Yo. Dog! Now you’re talking. I’d thought you’d never ask.”

“Not tonight,” Jeannette wearily replies as she stands and slowly makes her way towards the door, where -- being the conservation minded, tree-hugging Elf that she is -- she flicks off the overhead lights as she exits and leaves the author alone in near total darkness. It’s so dark, it’s sort of spooky. I mean, the only light in the room comes from the overhead security lights, the computer screens -- that no one ever seems to turn off these days -- the blinking red lights on the TV cameras, the illuminated exit signs, the digital clock on the microwave oven, that green light on the coffee maker that is sort of super-redundant as if you wouldn’t know if the machine was working or not, and the lights from a half dozen of other appliances, which will run throughout the night, because you know, it would be a hassle to turn them on in the morning or off at night.

Of course, since one more light can’t possibly make a difference and because Celaphopod’s have notoriously poor vision, the myopic creature decides that it would be best to turn a spotlight on himself. So he can read his story notes, naturally. And I suppose, should anyone so desire, so they would also be able to make out his handsome features under the bright lights.

And with that being said -- as sufficient prelude to this here pivotal scene -- the Celaphopod turns his good side towards the camera. Which is to say, he sort of swivels back and forth in his chair as he tries to decide which side is his good side. And then, realizing that they are ALL his good side, he flicks his lobes about,

gives the non-existent studio audience a playful smile, and delves without further ado into the heart of the scene, which just happens to be a moving soliloquy of epic proportions made by yours truly that conveniently recaps the plot to date.

And yes, there is a plot. To wit:

“We have a nemesis, the dreaded NAS-gh©uls™,” the Celaphopod begins as he stands and clears his throat. “They make Buddy look like a Troll Scout by comparison. This is a good thing, because Buddy is slated to play the antihero, the fallen good guy, the born again bad guy, the reconstituted archetype of... of... of whatever it is that he is with some degree of authenticity...”

Um, I seem to have lost my focus. But then, no. I shouldn't admit that. Not here. Not now. So, let's just say, all of this has been said for dramatic affect. And happy with this explanation (however erroneous, misleading, or patently contradictory it may be), the Celaphopod turns his other good side to face Camera #2.

“The point is, Buddy may be a jerk, but he's not pure evil -- not like those Nasty-Nasty-Ghoul chaps who are currently running amuck as they carve a swath of destruction through The Dragon's territory, wielding terrifying weapons of mass destruction...

“Um... Ah... Um...

“I don't know if this was made clear or not, but weapons (of mass destruction or otherwise) aren't allowed in the Seven Realms -- not by NAS-gh©uls™, not by Buddy, not by nobody, no way, no how. Not even the Goblins on the Eastern, Western, or Southern Front have weapons once they step over the border. Bottom line, friend or foe, good guy or bad, everyone loses their weapons once they cross over into the Seven Realms. So, not only are the NAS-gh©uls™ really-really bad guys for having wiped out both the Sm©rk™ and Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ dimensions. But they are also cheating -- as it were -- by bypassing the rules of the Seven Realms. I mean, it would be a lot like visiting the Earth vortex and then floating around all the time because you didn't think that Gravity should apply to you. It would be rude, inconsiderate, and

the bottom line is, if you start doing something like that, it won't be long before everybody is going to want to know how you managed it."

Which is sort of something to think about.

And is it just me, or does it seem like those acting lessons really paid off? The whole speech just sort of sent goose bumps down my spine, gave me chicken skin, and all that.

Anyway, satisfied that the plot is developing nicely, the Celaphopod sits back down, puts his legs up on the news desk, and fishes around in his pocket until he finds what he is looking for -- the old, nearly worn out Sm©rk™ that he keeps there. But he does not find any comfort in his lucky charm on this cold -- and save for the numerous lights, which illuminate him -- dark and blustery night.

"Don't look at me like that, Sm©rk™," the Celaphopod pleads desperately. But the accusing eyes of the Last of the Sm©rk™'s haunts his soul. "It's just a story. Besides, your value on Manna-Bay is sure to skyrocket now that you are a unique, one of kind collectable." But under the unflinching glare of the Sm©rk™, the author's confidence in the preceding scene and the marketing appeal of random gratuitous violence, which he has been incorporating into the story thus far, slowly wavers. And it is at this critical juncture, as the spotlight narrows to a tight beam centered on the Sm©rk™, that the finger sized piece of bendable plastic chooses to remain silent -- eerily silent if I may be so bold as to observe. It would seem that the Sm©rk™ would prefer not to speak than to offer up his usual words of comfort and encouragement.

And with that we shall fade out...

And that my friends, is what they call -- Acting!!!

Of course, if you really want to get an authentic performance out of your thespian crew, it can sort of help -- to add realism if nothing else -- if you don't actually tell your actors -- or hot Elvin

actresses in this particular case -- that the camera is still rolling. Because figuratively speaking -- in a book, at least -- the camera is always rolling.

And with that as a lead in, perhaps we should cut to Jeannette and Camera #3.

9

Just Do Them!

Jeannette speaks silently to herself as she walks alone down the rain slick street towards her apartment.

“I should have bitten him. The next time I see him, I’m just going to bite him. I not going to say hello. I’m not going to exchange any witty banter. When he shows up, I’m just going to lay in and bite him. My ratings will shoot through the roof and I’ll be rid of the jerk forever.”

See what I mean about Jeannette having a thing for me? Here we are, already into the next chapter, I’m nowhere around, and she still can’t stop thinking about me. If that’s not true love, then...

“Shut Up!” Jeannette screams suddenly and without warning -- presumably at the night air. See how it is? She’s haunted -- possessed, as it were -- by the bittersweet memory of the Dashing Go-Lucky Celaphopod, renegade author who is equally at ease behind the co-anchor’s news desk. Jeannette secretly wonders what other hidden talents the mysterious rogue might have.

“Like shutting up,” Jeannette responds almost habitually at this point. “I’m wondering if you can just leave me in peace and let me walk home alone.”

A request like that really puts me in quite the quandary.

“Don’t make it more complicated than it is. Just shut up and leave me alone.”

That’s what I’m trying to say. I’d like to. This would be the perfect opportunity for me to quietly leave you alone, to prove that yes indeed I am that rare breed of gentlemen that you had thought

had disappeared from the world, and just let the narrative flow take its course, but I can't.

"Because you're not a gentleman," Jeannette sneers with that hard biting Elvin sarcasm, which we have all come to know and love.

No, because you are an integral part of the current plot. The next scene takes place at your apartment.

"What?"

Let's try that again, but this time with more feeling.

"WHAT? What did you just say?"

That's better...

"Just tell me what you are talking about!"

Um, haven't we already been through this? Didn't I already mention that books in general (and Dragon Bound books in particular) are not the high budget affairs that some people think they are. And because of this, clever authors (like me), need to take advantage of whatever free locations they can find. So, um. I hope you don't mind, but the next major milestone in the plot of this carefully crafted story takes place in your bedroom.

"No! No, I never agreed to that. I'm not even in your stupid book."

You really should talk to your agent more.

"This is Sam's doing?"

As in, Sam the Slippery Snake? Ah, yes. But then, his name should have been a sort of warning as to his true nature.

But really, that is neither here nor there. What's far more important is that Jeannette has opted to wear one of those stylish new Nifty Brand Running Suits for the trip home.

That would be Nifty Brand Casual Wear for the professional woman. Isn't it time you took some time off from the high pressure demands of dressing for success to clothe yourself in comfort?

"What are you talking about?"

I'm just saying, Nifty is the clothing brand of choice for the professional woman, available at finer stores across the Realms.

And I see you are even wearing their new Urban Dungeon running shoes in Panther Pink -- Rowlr.

“You sound like a commercial.”

That’s a good idea. Let’s roll some tape. Carl?

“I got your back, Celaphopod dude.”

“Adventuring is hard on the rogue classes,” goes the booming voiceover, while a video shows a thief, first falling into a pit, then getting sliced in half by a blade trap, and finally picked off at the rear of the party (while he’s trying to rest and recuperate, I might add) by a giant monster with eyes the size of the thief’s head with claws and teeth to match. Clearly an adventuring thief’s lot is not as glamorous as the dailies would have you believe.

Of course, that was just the commercial’s introductory segment. And once it has played through, the scene resets back at the start in in the deep dank dark depths of a dungeon to show what could have been -- if only if...

As the adventuring party walks grimly by, the camera focuses in on each and every character as the voiceover resumes -- only now it conveys a tone of ill-disguised contempt. “The fighter is covered from head to toe with Thermal Reinforced Kevlar Body Armor. The dungeon ceiling could collapse and he wouldn’t feel a thing. The spell slinger is protected on all sides. He hasn’t seen open combat since he made second level. And, the cleric: isn’t he the one who sucks down a Potion of Extra-Healing whenever he stubs his toe, but only grudgingly dispenses cosmetic B@nd-@ids to the rest of the party, even if they’ve got a spike sticking out of their forehead or are on death’s door?

“Come now, is this really what you had in mind when you started your career? You’re the thief, the rogue, the brains of the outfit. You’re the only one with the guts to scout ahead. And more importantly, you’re the only one who knows what’s there.”

And with this, the video cuts to a close-up of a thief bumping into a pair of eyes in the dark. The thief lights a match to see what it is. It’s a Depth Fiend -- an angry, viscous, hungering for

adventurer flesh, Depth Fiend. The thief turns and runs. He runs past the fighter who idly turns to follow the thief with his eyes. He runs past the spell slinger who looks up from the comic book he is reading. He runs past the cleric and grabs the blue test tube -- containing an extra-healing potion, I might add -- that the cleric was getting ready to drink. And still the thief continues to run down the dungeon passage and to the safety of the surface. Meanwhile, the camera view swings back to focus on the adventuring party as they stare in wonder after the thief while behind them a Depth Fiend and his seven buddies slowly -- and quite quietly -- walk into view.

You know the drill. The picture turns black as loud sounds of pain and brutality fill the senses. And then, we cut to a peaceful forest meadow. A creek bubbles merrily away. A butterfly flutters on the wind, not a care in the world. And the thief emerges from the cavernous mouth of the dungeon, running for all he's worth into the rising sun and the glory of another day.

Let the relief and emotion flow through you. And then, listen with all ears as the announcer cuts to the quick and explains the moral of this little side-tale, "You don't have to outrun a pack of Depth Fiends, Dungeon Sweepers, or whatever else your perverse Dungeon Master imagines it would be fun to throw at you. All you have to do outrun the rest of your party."

Once again, the scene cuts to a different view. We are rejoining the thief as he enjoys a beer at the Dungeon Edge Café. As the door opens, he turns to watch as a party of obviously first level adventurers come through the front door and proceed to unpack the 101 Piece Adventurer Starter Sets they just got at MagicCo. "We need an experienced thief to join our party," they call out, and as the rest of the patrons in the tavern eye the newcomers, the thief takes this opportunity to pick the pocket of his neighbor, before slipping out the back door.

"Nifty Running Shoes: for when your life depends on it."

“I wondered why Sam gave me this outfit,” Jeannette muses thoughtfully.

He’s a good snake that Sam. He said he’d get you in a Nifty Running Suit and he did. Um, you know that you get a piece of the action, right.

But without so much as a word of thanks, the second they arrive in front of her door, Jeannette says to the night air. “This is my apartment. I’m going to go inside and you are going to leave me alone or I’m going to call the cops.”

And I thought we were getting along pretty well there for a moment. Oh, well.

The important thing is that as Jeannette roots about in her purse searching for her key, the door to her apartment swings open on its own volition -- like they sometimes do in those ghost stories or detective novels. Anyway, if we rule out ghastly apparitions for the moment, it would appear that someone has broken into Jeannette’s abode.

“What have you done to my apartment?” the cute Elvin woman screams in that near hysterical rage that we have all come to know and love. And if I know her like I think I know her, she was just about to continue on about how she was going to gut the author like a pig if he had destroyed anything of hers, but during the preceding moments, the door has continued to swing open, and it is just about here that a pair of cowboy boots heavily caked with mud is revealed.

“Minne!” Jeannette exclaims with obvious delight. Running inside, she quickly kicks off her Urban Dungeon running shoes -- now available in Pixie Pink, Golem Green, Boring Brown, and Traditional Black -- and dashes off to find her man.

Um, the truth is, I know most of you aren’t on the bandwagon with that whole Minne is a jerk thing. I mean, I know what you’re thinking. Sure he hits bound Centaurs and sells them off for dog food. Sure he’s been accused of cutting off the occasional Unicorn horn, but that’s never been proven. Besides, it

happened off screen. It could have been anybody. And when you get right down to it, the Unicorn probably didn't have a horn when he joined the herd in the first place. And all this talk about K'fr? Well, so what if Minne uses a little K'fr? What's so bad about K'fr? Everybody's done a little K'fr now and again. Why I've even heard that The Lady Ruby -- Consort to The Dragon, no less -- was at a party just last week where some of the boys were snorting K'fr in the bathroom, and you know it's not that bad if Ruby's in on it.

And, I don't even want to get started on that whole weapons ban thing. Not everyone is against weapons, you know. Those fine folks down at the NFAA think Minne is some sort of hero. Of course, I'm not going to give those NFA-Association guys any glory by reprinting their letters, but it's enough to say that I get thousands of them. They never send any money, and they're always going on about how the first thing the Nelk did when they came was take away the Grood's swords. And if somebody could tell me exactly what that's supposed to mean, I'd be, oh, so happy, but then believe it or not, this little rant isn't about The Dragon's oppression, the Nelk, the Grood, or the NFAA, it's about what a jerk Minne is.

Well, will you look at this? I take it back. I am going to print one of those NFAA letters. This one is a classic.

Dear Miss-Guided Author,

The despotism that is The Dragon's rule has unjustly and unconstitutionally squashed every Troll's, Ogre's, and Dwarf's Gra'gl given right to protect themselves. As we all know, observance of this law is not voluntary. We can't simply refuse to register our weapons, hide them under our beds, or paint them a different color. The Dragon uses his insidious forces of magic to... well, to magically eliminate all weapons from his domain. Therefore, if Buddy -- or Minne, or whoever you are calling this courageous hero -- has an

AK-47/5889x, it is clear that AK-47/5889x's are not weapons.

I personally use my AK-47/5889x with side mounted rocket launchers, diamond tip bayonet, and under-turret beam weapon in the kitchen to chop celery and the Missus always found the rockets helpful in the garden.

As you are aware, the Weapons Ban does not apply to items whose primary purpose is utilitarian -- such as a Dwarf's mining hammer, an Elf's leather punch, or an Orc's walking stick.

The Missus' use of our AK-47/5889x's in the garden proves that it is not a weapon, but rather a simple gardening tool, and your continual portrayal to the contrary only serves to highlight your ignorance. No wonder Jeannette hates you. In a better world, where Elvin journalists were free to pack personal protection, your brand of harassment would have ended long ago.

Sincerely,

The Ogre Moses

National Field Artillery Association's Spokes-Ogre

First off, let's get one thing straight. Jeannette wants me. She just maybe doesn't know it yet. Secondly, and let's face it not nearly as important as that first thing, is that Moses is wrong. AK-47/5889-x-r-whatever's are weapons. They will never be allowed under the tool exemption. Thirdly, and this is the entire point of this little rant here, is that I've been going on for some time, filling the air with my self serving, ego fulfilling, random dialog. And while I've been doing this, has the lovely Jeannette Stevens -- Elf of heavenly delight, beloved newswoman, and future mother of my children -- noticed? No. She has not.

Nor has she told me -- or more accurately, shrieked at me -- to shut up.

Why?

The minute Jeannette saw Minne's boots at her door, she was in her own little world. Whenever Minne is in town, it's always the same. It's Minne this and Minne that. It's Minne is such a real Minataur, you could never be as good an anthropomorphism as Minne is, and blah, blah, blah.

I mean, we were having a conversation here, a little quality time together, and she just ups and forgets that I even exist. And so even though I continue to ramble on with no end in sight, there is not a chance in the world that Jeannette will offer up those sweet words of revulsion and distaste and tell me shut up.

Why?

Why is that?

It's because she thinks Minne is in her bedroom waiting for her. Ask any guy, any love struck author, any Celaphopod on the make, and each and every one of them will tell you: if that doesn't make Minne a Jerk with a capital J, then nothing does.

Of course, there is a one little consolation prize buried in all of this. Since Jeannette hasn't been coming to any of the crew meetings, she doesn't know that the role of Minne is now being played by Buddy. Boy, will she ever be surprised!

10 #
Minataurs!

Let's recap.

Home from a hard day's work at the office -- and nonstop harassment by the author -- Jeannette is glad to be home. She had to park three blocks away again, you know. She doesn't like having to walk that far at night; there are so many creeps running about.

Anyway -- that short recap completed -- we shall resume the action right at the moment Jeannette had started to ignore the author and had paused in front of her apartment door.

Somebody has been here, this much is clear. Somebody has broken her door and entered her apartment. The doorjamb is busted. The deadlock has been kicked in. And as Jeannette stands there enraged -- for dramatic effect if nothing else -- the door slowly swings open.

She cringes. She dreads what she might see. Perhaps all of her belongings will have been ransacked and scattered about. Or maybe all the food in her a kitchen will be dumped on the floor by some K'fr addicted fool who thinks she might have stored a sack of gold in her flour jar. Or then again, maybe it will be worse. Maybe the intruder will still be inside. One never knows.

Slowly -- let the drama build -- the door swings open. But nothing appears amiss. Her valuable Sm©rk™ collection in the case by the front door is intact just as she left it. Her Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ Dolls are all lined up on the counter. And basically, everything is exactly as she left it. Except that is, for the pair of muddy -- size 18 -- cowboy boots that someone has taken off and left by the front door. Clearly, they can only be Minne's. Caked in mud, he had taken them off before he walked through her apartment. How thoughtful! How considerate!

How sickening it is to hear such misguided thoughts!

Worse! We must watch as Jeannette playfully flips off her shoes. I mean, just the merest thought of Minne and she forgets all about that kicked in door thing, or that it will cost her five hundred -- in gold! -- to fix it. She doesn't even seem to mind the muddy trail of footprints that trudge a path of crud across her carpet. Minne -- What a guy! -- he took off his shoes. What more could you ask for?

Sickened by it all -- how unfair love does truly seem to be -- the unseen presence of the author lingers by the threshold, while oblivious to his pain, Jeannette walks quietly -- and with obviously giddy delight -- into the apartment.

Once inside, she notices that the doors to her liquor cabinet have been flung open. Minne must have been waiting a while and

gotten bored, she reasons. Isn't it convenient how she continues to overlook the muddy trail or how long it will take her to clean that up? Oh, she is so blinded by love.

It really is too painful to describe. Must I go on? Must I twist the bloody blade that is stabbing my heart?

But once again oblivious to my suffering, Jeannette follows the muddy trail from the liquor cabinet to the bathroom. Conveniently, that door too has been left wide open. And so, it is easy for both Jeannette and us to see that the floor is an inch deep in water and muck. Come on, folks! Mud cakes the walls like plaster. It's dripping from the ceiling. I mean, really! You see the kind of thoughtless thug this Minne is. But no! Does Jeannette get upset? Not at all. She's glad Minne got all clean and ready for her. It's sick. Love is so blind. And then, get this. Having seen Minne's pile of muddy clothes on the bathroom floor, she decides to add her own to them.

This is why we have a script, folks! A professional Elf like Jeannette throwing herself at a Jerk like Minne? This isn't realistic! This isn't believable! Tell me you believe Minne deserves a woman -- a creature, a divine goddess of mercy -- like Jeannette Stevens. She's way out of his league. But she's so blind to his faults, and she's so humble, so kind, so caring, so adorable, that she can't see the thug for what he really is. She thinks she's in love with Minne, and as such can't wait to join him in her bedroom where she knows that he's waiting for her, you know, since he's not anywhere else in the apartment.

So with this in mind, Jeannette walks down the hall -- all naked like. And at least in that, there's some consolation. But the real consolation comes when she swings open the door and screams:

“Who in Gra'gl's name are you? Get out! Get out! Get out!”

11

The Ol' Switch-a-ro

(Due to its graphic nature, the following chapter may not be suitable for all readers.)

(Suffice to say, there is a reason Minne was popular with the ladies and it has everything to do with the fact that Minataur's are endowed with the head of a bull.)

(To be fair, maybe that's just a guy thing, but then I'm a guy, so would you expect anything less?)

(Hey, this is fun! How many of these bracket segment thingies do you think I can get away with before my editor cuts me off?)

Four. The answer is four.
Eddy the Editing Editor

As you will no doubt remember -- considering it really wasn't that long ago and as we've already been through this twice before -- Jeannette noticed Minne's boots at the front door to her apartment and immediately proceeded to take off her Urban Dungeon Running Shoes from Nifty. After that, she quickly -- and eagerly -- walked through her apartment until she got the bathroom where the rest of Minne's clothes were heaped in a pile. Being a polite hostess, it would be at this point that she removed the rest of her Nifty Brand Casual Wear outfit. The observant reader will deduce from the foregoing -- and quiet correctly I might add -- that this means both Minne and Jeannette Stevens are buck naked.

Yowza!

Rrrrowl!

Or as Jim -- your Werewolf friend and mine -- might say, O-ow-hooooo!

Trust me. It's a sight to behold. You can howl for whichever character you prefer. I'm very open-minded about that sort of thing.

And as if two stars of stage and screen prancing around in there skivvies wasn't enough to make this scene complete, I should remind you -- yes, once again -- that Jeannette doesn't realize Minne isn't the one who is waiting for her in her bed. Yes, that's right! Lying buck naked on her bed is none other than Buddy -- the lucky stiff.

But the real point is, upon seeing Buddy Jeannette screams.

"Who in Gra'gl's name are you?"

And then, "Get out!"

OK. I know you're confused, or at least I'm confused, so if you're not confused, maybe something is wrong? Maybe I'm not adequately expressing my own confusion? In other words, if you're still not confused -- even now, after all this, all this additional effort and twisting commentary -- the least you can say is that I tried... to confuse you. Anyway, peeling away the myriad layers of confusion that may -- or then again, may not -- have been there in the first place was -- more or less -- my paltry excuse for recapping the scene, mentioning that Jeannette was and is totally and completely naked, and listening to her scream once again.

"Get out!"

Ah, how I long to hear those words yelled in my general direction on some cold and lonely night in the future...

Anyway, if you'll remember back to the first chapter of this here book -- Minataur Tales -- that in that first chapter I went on and on about how I don't do character descriptions -- and trust me, now that we have Jeannette in all her naked glory I'm sort of rethinking my entire stance on that issue. But then, seeing as how I'm at a loss for words to describe her, I won't. And I can, further, assure you that I (more than anybody else) am more than a little disappointed by that, but such is life.

But, oh, and by the way, I hear there's an unauthorized photo set of this particular scene available on naked-elvin-babes.com-net. But then again, they keep on pulling it due to some sort of invasion of privacy issue, so you just might want to hit Crazy George's homepage instead. He usually has a link to it posted. But then, I digress. I suppose, I'm just stalling at this point. I mean, as you can imagine, my hands are shaking. I'm sort of flustered. And the truth of the matter is, the longer it takes to write this scene, the longer that Elvin babe of my dreams stays naked...

"Get on with it!" hisses the naked Elvin babe of my dreams, as her skin glows in the soft moonlight...

"Get on with it!" repeats my precious moon flower.

But then the real thing that I was trying to say is that Minne has precious few magical powers. I mean, they are -- and I list them in order of importance -- he can track through the vortexes and he can change his appearance at will. So like, who would know what Minne had chosen to look like on any given day? And so basically, how would Jeannette know that it wasn't Minne in her bed?

In short, she could not!

No, there must have been another reason why Jeannette yelled! And what was that reason my dear reader?

Jeannette yelled, because draped across Buddy's midriff -- covering all the good bits in a tasteful, artful manner -- was (and is) a semi-unconscious Pixie with slightly ruffled wings. I should, of course, point out the mini-dress caught in the ceiling fan overhead, circling around and around and around that a detail-oriented observer might notice; or that a reader with a good memory for bit characters might remember this particular Pixie as Nellie from the Dungeon Edge Café chapter in that most famous of books -- The Dragon Bound Quartet.

"You can go now," Jeannette hisses as she glares at the Pixie.

But being the professional actress that she is, Nellie only manages to squeeze out a K'fr induced "Te-He" before losing her balance and slipping off of Buddy's torso.

And at this point, I feel I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to mention that Buddy has been playing his role to perfection: comatose, unmoving. I mean, his eyes are even dilated.

Now that's acting!

"And, Cut!" Carl the Courteous Cobalt calls from over the loudspeaker as a small group of financial backers huddled in the corner of Jeannette's bedroom clap enthusiastically.

"What a scene!"

"Hear! Hear!"

"Encore! Encore!"

"Who are these people?" Jeannette demands to know.

"Money people," Crazy George supplies lazily from the doorway where he has suddenly appeared eating Chinese take-out food directly from the carton with his fingers.

"Is that my supper?" a flabbergasted Jeannette Stevens asks.

But George only ignores her question as he remarks, "Somebody should get this pretty little Elf something to wear."

Seeing as how no one in the room is moving -- just sort of staring, eyes agape -- in disgust Jeannette squeezes past Crazy George and the rest as she grabs a towel that was hanging in the bathroom before continuing on towards the kitchen phone...

Um, excuse me.

As he catches up to Jeannette, the author -- and/or the Celaphopod -- asks in mock disbelief, "You're not really calling the cops?"

"Yes," she replies incredulously -- and have I ever mentioned how cute Jeannette looks when she's angry, incredulous, or getting ready to phone the cops. OK, you're right. I probably have. So, we should probably just sit back and listen to her as she says, "Who do you think you are, anyhow?"

“So, you’re serious? You’re really going to call the cops? You don’t want to have a major starring role when we do the big quest sequence?” It’s coming up any moment now, I swear.

“NO!” Jeannette yells as she shakes her head in frustration and does the only reasonably thing that an Elf can do in such a situation. She calls 911, which is sort of out of character when you get right down to it. I mean, hadn’t she been going on and on about how she was going to bite...

Um yeah, and then rather than completing that particular thought, I feel it would be best for all concerned -- or at least for me and my tender flesh -- if we were to return to the bedroom and rejoin the rest of the crew.

Thankfully, we’re in time to watch as Nellie makes a halfhearted attempt to put on her ripped mesh-style pantyhose. When she is satisfied they’re up far enough -- which is not very far, you know how those Pixies are -- she takes out a small compact mirror and proceeds to check her make-up.

This would be about when Steve the Ranger -- her boyfriend -- sits down beside her and plants a great big kiss on her lips. “Great scene, honey!”

“I’ll say,” George adds from where he’s anchored himself in the doorway. I would say that he’s anchored himself there once again, but he’s never really moved, so the insinuation would be wrong. Not that George cares about that -- politeness, etc. He’s got his mind on other concerns at the moment. “You’re going to get me a copy of all this, right Carl?”

“Uh, I don’t... know... if... I... can”, Carl replies as his voice slowly trails off. It seems as though George -- Crazy George, insane wizard extraordinaire -- has drawn Carl’s attention to the strip of manna that George is holding in his hands and playing with idly.

And for those who patently refuse to buy the first book -- The Dragon Bound Quartet -- (perhaps on some lame pretext like it’s not available in their vortex, yet), I should reiterate: Crazy George

is a wizard and as his name would imply, he is quite mad. I mean, we're talking crazy -- out of control, insane, bent on killing The Dragon, two ex-wives to support, down on his luck, the IRS takes 99.99999% of what he makes for back taxes, can't get a break, thought he had a second career lined up as an arms dealer and then The Dragon outlawed weapons, type of on the edge, just this far from losing it completely mentally unstable, hence the name Crazy George -- type of crazy insane wizard. In the end the important thing to remember is that he's a wizard, because for most people the name sort of conveys that whole crazy/insane part quite adequately.

And this crazy wizard is just sort of idly twisting a piece of mana, a piece of magical raw energy in his hands. What will he do with it? Turn Carl into a frog? Or maybe a toadstool? Heck, maybe he'll just blow up the apartment? The entire city block? Or maybe -- if you're just lucky -- he'll whip up a little hot sauce for his Chinese food, because he's crazy like that, man. He's crazy!

But then, it's not like Crazy George is a bad guy. Don't get me wrong. I would be the last person to call him a bad guy. It's just that he's not a good guy. I mean, he's the type of guy who would turn you into a frog -- as a joke -- and then never remember to turn you back -- as if that whole forgetting thing was the punch line to some twisted joke.

Anyway, after you come to realize all this, it should make perfect sense when Carl the Courteous -- if Cowardly -- Cobalt backtracks on his ethical concerns and says sort of nervously, "Uh yeah, I got your copy right here, George," as the mana in George's hands turns into a movie reel case.

At this point with nothing better to do, George slips the film into his pocket and resumes eating Jeannette's supper -- right there in the doorway. He doesn't even move when the author tries to come back into the room. I mean, he makes me squeeze past him. He doesn't even try to move a little. He doesn't even move his foot or his leg. I'm the author here, guys. Let's show a little respect.

“I’ll show you respect when you earn it,” George sneers with the type of attitude that this here author is getting weary of from his bit characters.

“I’m not a bit character,” George replies offhandedly as he hands the Celaphopod the empty carton of Chinese food. “Here, take care of this. I’ve got to talk to Buddy.”

Now Buddy...

What’s there to say?

I mean, you’ve got to hand it to Buddy: the professionalism, the dedication to a performance. Throughout this entire chapter -- this entire time -- he’s been laying on the bed -- like comatose. I mean, the pillow has drool on it. For all practical purposes, the man -- er, Minataur, I mean -- looks like he’s down for the count. He doesn’t even wake up -- or break character -- when George gives him a few slaps across the face. And just between you and me, George has never struck me as the type of guy to tire of slapping another guy in his sleep, so it’s a tribute of sorts to Buddy’s acting when George finally decides that the best course of action is to sit Buddy up and splash some water in his face.

Still, I don’t know how he does it. For all the world, Buddy looks like he’s just coming out of a deep, K’fr induced coma.

I’ve said it before, but I just have to say it again.

Now that’s acting!

Of course, Buddy looks a bit groggy, and seeing as how he and Crazy George appear to have some sort of important business to attend to, we’ll just leave them alone for a while.

12

Nellie

Besides, the real reason we came back into Jeannette’s bedroom again was to talk with Nellie.

We're almost at the start of the quest -- the exciting meat and potatoes of the story -- and you're going to be the fourth member of the team, Nellie. How do you feel about that?

"I'm really excited. I can't tell you how happy I am to have the work."

Unlike some Elf's we know.

"Huh? Oh Jeannette, she's just playing a role."

She's really convincing.

"Tell me about it, but she's got nothing on Buddy. He's into that whole realistic acting thing. What do they call it?"

"Method acting," her boyfriend, Steve the Ranger, supplies helpfully. He's a smart guy, after all, and he understands the full value of having that all important face time in front of an audience.

OK. So why don't we start a little further back? You two are dating?

"It's more than dating," Nellie beams excitedly as she shows off the twist of twine wrapped around her finger.

"That's a traditional Moonbeam vine picked from the entrance to the Tomb of Terror on the first new moon of the year. I know it's not as dangerous as it once was, but traditions are traditions," Steve explains helpfully -- if not entirely romantically.

"What counts is that it came from you, Steve," Nellie squeals as she hugs her man (literally, as Steve is human).

"Someday that'll be a diamond or a genuine star stone, Celli," as the Celaphopod is sometimes called by his friends, Steve explains. "Whatever my baby wants. But right now every cent we make is going into the farm."

They bought a farm after their adventures (together?) in The Dragon Bound Quartet. (Who knows? Read the book and find out, I suppose.) But that doesn't really concern us right now. Steve's probably just trying to find a way to mention that Buttermilk Farms™ is an all organic, fully modernized, Druidic based farming commune, and that if you buy a stalk of celery with the Buttermilk Farms™ logo on it, you can be sure the seed was

planted under the full moon with all the associated rites and rituals you come to expect from the lunatic fringe.

“Darn tooting. You know, you’re quite the pro at this, Celli.”

OK. So we’ve done your plug. Can we move on? Nellie, tell us again how you and Steve met.

“Well, I’d been working at the Dungeon Edge Café for a couple of years where Steve had been a regular. After Ruby swung through on her adventure and shook everything up, he stopped coming around for a couple months -- and if you knew Steve, you’d know that wasn’t like him -- so when he eventually stopped by again, it was only natural for me to ask him what he’d been up to.”

“During those missing months is when I started Buttermilk Farms™. I was still trying to get customers -- you know, this was back before ritualized farming made it big -- and so I showed her some of the stuff I had in my trunk...”

“Don’t tell them this part,” Nellie interrupts blushing, “It’s embarrassing.”

“She’s cute when she blushes, don’t you think?”

I’ll say.

“Stop teasing me. If you’re going to tell the story, tell it.

“Well, Nellie’s a Pixie and she likes to play all prim and proper, but deep down inside she’s really just a Pixie. And like I said, I was going around to the truck stops, restaurants, and bars that I used to frequent and showing them my stuff: melons, lettuce, fresh herbs, and that sort of thing. Well, I had some huge cucumbers and zucchini with me on that trip, and Nellie said that if I was packing produce that size, she’d follow me anywhere. She was just joking, of course.”

“No I wasn’t. I went inside and quit right then and there. Adventuring is never going to come back to that part of the Realms, not now. They even turned the old Dungeon into some sort of trendy upscale condo. The new residents aren’t good tippers, you know.”

“Right, there it is. And we’ve been farming happily ever since.”

So why the adventure? You do know that it’s possible to die, get cursed, or something like that?

“It takes three years to get certified by the Druidic Board. It doesn’t matter if you’re farming in a vortex that’s never used pesticides or even heard of a county farming extension agent. It’s really unfair, but there it is. Anyway, until we get certified, times are going to be pretty lean.”

“Besides, it’s seems safe,” Nellie jumps in. “I’m playing a support role to Ruby Firehaven Consort to The Dragon. She’s not going to let anything happen to me. Besides, we read the script. It’s pretty tame.”

Really! The author’s ears suddenly perk up. I could really use a copy of that script.

“I haven’t seen it in a while,” Nellie has to admit.

“We must have misplaced it,” Steve shrugs. “Anyway, this was the worst scene from my point of view. And now, it’s over. From here on out, Nellie keeps her skirt on. Ruby’s only fifteen, you know. There’s not going to be any hanky-panky with her around.”

“It’s going to be hard. That’s for sure,” Nellie agrees -- you know how Pixies are.

And as fun as it would be to grill Nellie and cross-examine her on exactly how she intends to keep her clothes on, let’s focus for a second or two and get back to the story.

Nellie, in the story you’re in Jeannette’s bedroom presumably fooling around with -- or at least sleeping on top of -- Buddy. How did that happen. How did the two of you get here?

“Like I said, Buddy is into that realistic acting thing -- like big time. He called me yesterday from the road,” i.e. from the round up, “and said he was in town and that I should meet him at the corral. Well, to celebrate the cattle drive the other Minataurs and him must have dropped by a bar for a drink or something on the way in because he was already way out of control by the time I

showed up. We went around looking for another place to party, but Rigor Pass really isn't the wild place it once was. It's a bedroom community now. And since neither Buddy nor I could think of anywhere else to go, we just headed back here to Jeannette's."

So in a nutshell, Buddy was back from the cattle drive and he was looking to do some hard partying, so naturally he called you, a Pixie?

"According to the script, I'm supposed to be some sort of bar-wench that he picked up. In an effort to get 'the feel' and add realism, we even went to Lucky's Tavern, but all you can get there now is malted milks. They're good -- don't get me wrong -- but malted milks don't pack the kind of punch Buddy was looking for. See in the story, Buddy has all this K'fr and I fall for him because I'm some sort of strung out K'fr..." and here Nellie just sort of chokes on the word and drifts away.

"She doesn't like to say it," Steve explains. "It's an underserved stereotype that Pixies and the Fey'an League have been trying to fight for some time now. Pixies are simply fun loving creatures. They don't have the same mores and hang ups that other creatures do, and sometimes they get judged harshly based on that, which is unfair, because they're not bad."

"We're just not good," Nellie continues as she perks up at the line. "I'm not going to speak for other Pixies, just myself. I like to have a good time. OK! Is there anything wrong with that? It doesn't take a genius to realize, it's easier to have a good time with other folks who are also having a good time," than with a bunch of wet blankets. "And well, if these other folks happen to show up with a whole saddlebag full of K'fr, then that means the good times can roll for a long ole while and you can invite all your sisters and cousins along for the ride."

"The holidays are wild on the farm, you should come out sometime."

I think I'll consider that an open invitation to the Buttermilk Farms™ where the Pixies Party!

But seriously Nellie, I couldn't help but notice how you're fiddling with your wing. Did you get hurt?

"I'm a Pixie. I don't have to tell you this, but some of your reader's might not know that this means I'm only two feet tall. Buddy's like what? Six, seven, eight feet tall, and he really gets into his acting. He doesn't pull his punches..."

Um, we heard earlier from Hank the Centaur that he did.

"I'm speaking in the script."

"Yeah," Steve adds all serious like. "For most of that last scene Nellie was using a body double, so the whole wing adjusting thing is just acting."

Acting? A Body double? The humble narrator repeats as he tries to remember this bit of trivia from his long lost script.

"Yes! Yes! A body double!" Nellie interjects. "Just like we discussed at the last crew meeting, remember? I couldn't do the role unless you let my cousin Nancy do the nude parts."

"Yeah," Steve agrees enthusiastically -- if a little simplistically -- while shaking his head vigorously and showing off the moonbeam vine on both of their fingers again, just in case the entire thing wasn't clear enough already.

"So, it's a BODY DOUBLE or no deal," Nellie says slowly and deliberately hoping the author has some sense -- despite all appearances to the contrary.

Um well then, Nancy did a wonderful job. Why don't you see if you can't get her to come back sometime for some publicity stills? Maybe something artsy for the cover?

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Steve says accepting the commission for Nancy with eager assurance. "From what Nellie tells me, Nancy needs the work."

Then that's settled.

And I think we'll all be happier -- or at least, I'll be happier -- if we blur out Nellie's indignant, "Don't I get a say?" and just sort of move on.

Luckily -- or then again, maybe not so luckily -- Jeannette choose this particular moment to return to her bedroom, bringing with her two large, oversized, and angry looking Ogre police officers.

Upon realizing the seriousness of the situation and in no particular order:

Crazy George looked up from where he was talking to Buddy, snapped his fingers, and disappeared -- as wizards are prone to do.

For his part, Buddy looked up with eyes glazed over from the K'fr. He stared blindly at the room for a moment before acting instinctually, which probably wasn't such a smart idea seeing as how this led him to a course of action that included crashing through the window (without opening it), landing on the fire escape, jumping the two stories to the ground in one Fell leap (yuck-yuck), and driving off in the squad car that just happened to be waiting there for him.

Seeing as how this was the start the adventure -- and Nellie's big role -- on nearly broken wings the Pixie flew haphazardly after Buddy calling, "Wait for me Buddy! Wait for me!"

As you may have noticed, the author craftily slipped into a highly conventional past tense narrative form, ignoring the playful calls of "Coward!" from his beloved Elvin admirer, a move which aided and abetted his escape. (It being hard to catch someone who is no longer there, but at one time was.)

While at the same time (whichever time that was), never one to let his eye stray from the bottom line, the author also took this opportunity to make the moneymen disappear, saving them from personal embarrassment. Of course, with Carl the Crafty Cobalt's helpful assistance and a copy of the unedited tape as evidence, a steady string of blackmail revenue was assured to both of them for years to come. Let's face it guys, it's easy to rewrite a scene for the second edition. You wouldn't want me to reveal any names? Or leave anyone in a compromising position with their pants down?

I didn't think so.

And that just leaves us with Steve -- poor-poor Steve. I almost feel sorry for Steve... almost. He was the last to leave. The only one left in the room as two big, angry, enraged, slobbering Ogre police officers towered over him.

"Is this your problem ma'am?" one of the Ogres asked helpfully as he indicated the diminutive ranger and ripped a post from the bed in case the situation might warrant the use of a club.

"We can solve this for you ma'am," the other agreed as he removed another bedpost and readied it for his own personal use.

But Steve wasn't a greenhorn Ranger. He'd been around adversity a time or two in his life. He knew exactly what to do and jumped headfirst out the window -- all the while thanking his lucky stars that he had decided to wear the new pair of Urban Dungeon Running Shoes (by Nifty!) that Nellie had given to him as a present that very morning.

What a coincidence!

But then, love is like that. Doing those little things for the ones that you love, like making sure they are wearing only the best in footwear when you are going to suddenly abandon them in a precarious situation or at a crucial plot turning moment.

Yes, that's right. When treachery is in the offing, be sure to wear Urban Dungeon Running Shoes by Nifty, because you never know where (or when) adventure awaits.

13

Hu'at!

Bad C©ps!

Bad C©ps!

Wha'cha Gonna Do?

Wha'cha Gonna Do,

When They're Filming You?

Seargeant Crush'em

Friday Night Pre-Shift Briefing Rigor Pass Police Department

An Ogre policeman stands behind a rickety podium at the front of a conference room filled with a motley array of law enforcement personnel. Ogres, Trolls, Gnomes, and even the occasional Elf -- who fancies himself a tough guy in a bid to break species stereotypes -- are squeezed into those small wooden chairs -- just like they use at twelve step meetings, church socials, and those scenes where a suspect is placed under a bright light and two or three police officers take turns hitting the 'perp'... or, er, that is, having a discussion with the suspect about the advantages that are to be had by way of cooperating with the law. Of course, when you think about it that way, it is sort of handy that they've got a whole room full of those wooden chairs because every once in a while one of the interrogators -- especially if Sergeant Crush'em is involved -- will grab a chair and start beating a suspect into a bloody pulp with it. This usually breaks the chair.

Um, I guess should point out the sheer number of police officers who are standing around the edges of the room right now. Every Monday morning a truckload of chairs is delivered, but by the Friday night briefing, which we are currently attending, half the force is standing again. The absence of chairs is a testament to the Rigor Pass PD's dedication to efficiency and justice -- no matter the cost!

I think that sets the scene adequately, so let's listen in as Sergeant Crush'em begins his briefing.

"A string of K'fr labs has been set up in the Goblin Warrens, again. They can't make any K'fr, of course, stupid Goblins..."

"Uh Sarge?" the lone Goblin in the room speaks up.

"Right," Crush'em concedes with obvious annoyance. "I'm not trying to imply that all Goblins are stupid, but these particular Goblin who are setting up the K'fr labs are -- for lack of a better word -- stupid, as in stupid Goblins."

“Uh, Sarge?” the token Goblin in the room speaks up once again.

“What is it? Uh Greg? Gary? Gertrude? Geronimo?”

“Ha! Ha!” the rank and file officers cry out as they burst into laughter.

“That’s a good one, Sarge.”

“Gertrude. Ha.”

“I think,” the Goblin says by way of trying to begin anew, but his comments are cut short by a crescendo of laughter, which bursts forth spontaneously across the room from his ill-chosen choice of words. I think, a goblin, as if.

After the delirium has quieted down some, Sergeant Crush’em wipes a tear from his eye as he remarks, “Oh, that’s good, that’s sweet. A thinking Goblin, that’s just rich.”

Undeterred, Hank the Goblin -- who’s name didn’t begin with G and therefore went against all Goblin stereotypes... as did the fact that he had graduated from second grade, had subsequently gone on to third, fourth, and so on until he had finally gotten a master’s degree in criminology from Rigor Pass’s own RPU. Yes, Hank -- the only Goblin to ever get a master’s degree in criminology in any fantasy setting (pretty much anywhere) -- is rather unique among Goblins. In fact, Hank is so unique, he can count to four. Actually, he can count far higher than four, but seeing as how the average Ogre can’t beyond four, four is more or less the standard of intelligence among police officers. Anyway, beyond that whole counting into the double digits thing, Hank can also string together a rational thought -- again something more or less unique among both goblins and police officers in general.

But now that I think about it, this is far more information than you really need to know about a small time, insignificant, almost nothing of a character. As is the fact that between the foregoing (not to mention the effects of affirmative action), Hank is pretty much a shoe-in for lieutenant before the end of the year. Understandably, the prospects have gone to his head. He’s a bit full of himself and more than a little uppity, so we should really be

expecting nothing less at this point than for Hank to square his shoulders, and begin anew -- once again, undeterred.

“I think,” but this time he doesn’t get very far, because he just stops and pauses, as if daring anyone to so much as giggle. This is obviously not a joking matter to him. And when no one so much as giggles or guffaws -- more or less, because it’s really not funny anymore -- Hank continues on, more or less without any further interruption (not even from the author).

“I think it would be much better for public relations if we simply referred to Goblins -- even stupid Goblins -- as merely Goblins.” When nobody (not even me) makes any comment about this inane -- patently insane -- idea, Hank adds, “We could even be proactive about the entire thing and refer to certain Goblins as go-getters, goal oriented, or even gallant, thus creating a positive role model for all Goblins to grown into.” I told you he was uppity.

Thankfully, this is all a bit more than Crush’em can take, so he cuts the little pipsqueak of a Goblin off before he can go any farther. “You’re going to wreck this department when you make lieutenant, aren’t you?”

“Serving the Goblin community is hardly wrecking the police department,” Hank counters.

“Right. If the TV crew wasn’t here, I think all of us would spend the next few minutes beating the crap out of you, Hank.”

“I could turn the camera off,” the Gnome behind the camera helpfully offers.

“No, That’s all right,” Crush’em replies. “Hank the Go-Getting Goal-Oriented Gallant Goblin can patrol with Larry for the next few weeks,” which of course would be a small miracle in and of itself as no one has ever survived a single shift with Larry let alone a week. He is simply death on his partners.

Hank is a smart one, though. He has that knack for survival that so many of the Horde seem to have, and without warning he suddenly starts to feel ill -- like he might be coming down with a cold or a flu or something -- and as such won’t be able to patrol that evening... or perhaps for the next few weeks or at least until he

makes lieutenant. But for some reason (personal survival, perhaps), he doesn't feel that right now is proper the time to mention this sudden change in his health.

Truthfully, I'm not really sure why I included that last segment. But what is done is done. I guess if you don't like it, you don't have to read it -- the author says ironically, being the cleverish sort of funnyman that he is.

Anyway!

"If that's done with, then let's get on with the briefing," Crush'em remarks as he begins again. "It seems as though we have some proactive goal oriented Goblins who are trying to brew K'fr in the warrens. They don't get no K'fr out of the deal, because of The Dragon's degree. But they're setting a lot of buildings on fire. And that's causing problems because even Goblins won't live in a burning building. As a result the Goblins are spreading out and looking for new places to live, so were going to have a couple extra squad cars in the warrens tonight, looking for labs," he says evenly as he looks Hank dead in the eye, "and any Goblin that looks like he might be smart enough to follow a recipe. And if we find any, well, we're going to talk to them. Which brings up some standard business, remember folks, we don't use species stereotyping. But if you see any Orc, Goblin, or a Depth Fiend driving, walking, sitting, standing, talking, listening, reading, writing, sleeping, drinking, eating, or breathing, you can bet they're breaking some law, somewhere, somehow. Hit them a few times with your Billy club and you should be able to get a resisting arrest charge out of 'em... or a bleeding on the sidewalk citation.

"As to other developments, because K'fr is impossible to obtain in Rigor Pass these days, many of the old slums are becoming vacant as the junkies go to alternative vortexes. When going through these seemingly abandoned buildings, be sure to be extra careful. Some of them have acquired new residents who are skittish and are not yet used to having police officers barge into

their homes unannounced. So until further notice, you're advised to follow standard procedure and knock before entering a residence." It would be about here that Crush'em feels the need to raise his hand to silence the growing dissent. "It's for your own good. I don't want to hear no complaints. If you don't follow protocol, you're not covered by the medical plan, and any required time-off to recover from your injuries will be considered a vacation.

"So if that's settled?" Crush'em asks as he takes a moment before continuing to glare at the groaning assemblage (in much the same way that your superior office managers have been doing since time immemorial, glare that is). "We've also got a ring of Pixie prostitutes operating at remote locations. A Pegasus unit will be dispatched to work with vice until we get them under control. And be on the look out for any Minataurs. Seems as though a gang of rustlers came into town last night and they had sentients mixed in with the herd. Rumor is one of the Minataurs found a way to sneak an AK-47/5889x into the Realms."

And it would be here that a collective gasp goes up from every police officer present.

"That's some weapon, Sarge."

"How'd he sneak it in?"

"Does this mean we're going to get our handguns back?"

"It means we've got a renegade Minataur terrorists on our hands. We're just supposed to talk to any Minataur we see, but we all know it's easier to have a conversation if the scumball in question is behind bars. Until further notice, arrest every Minataur out there! Assume they are armed, dangerous, and will resist arrest. Beat 'em if you have to. When we've got every last one of those Fell Beasts in custody, we'll let The Dragon sort it all out. Now get out there and do your job!"

Patrolman Larry Magma
Subterranean Parking Lot
Rigor Pass Police Department

A TV crew comes into view shadowing the legendary police officer Larry Magma.

“I always wanted to be a cop,” Larry Magma explains. “You know, be one of the good guys, protect women and children, that sort of thing.”

The backdrop of the scene is the basement parking garage of the Rigor Pass Police Station. Whenever possible, the film crew stays invisible and off screen as they faithfully follow Larry about.

You may note (as the camera directs your attention?) that the garage is full of newly polished shining police cars -- all of them that is, except for Larry’s. Larry’s patrol car looks like it ran into a brick wall in the not too distant past and was then picked up by a baby Titan and used like a toy to dig holes at the local beach. In short, the dents have dents, the rust has rust, and there is not a single piece of glass left anywhere on the entire vehicle -- broken or otherwise. It even looks like it might have caught on fire once or twice.

“This is my car,” Larry announces needlessly as he hops into the driver’s seat. “It’s the best in the force.” And then, noticing that the camera-guy isn’t moving, Larry asks, “Are you guys coming along or not?”

For dramatic effect, the camera-man/gnome/whatever hesitates for a moment -- as if deciding -- and then slowly crawls into the backseat of the vehicle. Of course, before the camera-dude gets in all the way or closes the door, Larry is off and running. He guns the engine and backs up into one of those concrete support posts that holds up the ceiling -- and that they put all over the place in these garages for some reason. Ignoring the impact (probably since it has had no noticeable effect on the car’s appearance -- bashed and battered as it is), Larry puts the car into gear and floors it. The wheels screech; the car fishtails around a corner; and as it emerges from the top of the exit ramp, the car goes airborne...

Some indeterminate time later Larry is driving a little more sanely -- oh, I'd say in the 80-90-100mph range -- but the real point of interest is the traffic light at the rapidly approaching intersection up ahead. It has turned red, but rather than slow down, Larry takes this opportunity to look into the backseat and face the camera-guy.

Picture it if you will or just rent the video. One hand is on the wheel. The other holds a cup of coffee that Larry sips from nonchalantly as Larry looks backwards towards the camera, which pretty much means that none of his attention is on the road as he launches into his personal biography. "See, growing up was hard for me."

"The road," the nervous camera-sissy retorts. More concerned with his life than ratings, trust me, he won't have a job for long.

"Don't worry about that," Larry insists. "This car can take anything. It's amazing." But Larry can see that the cowardly-camera-cur's attention is split, so he turns around briefly to negotiate his way -- skidding and screeching -- through the red light and traffic, before turning around to face the camera, once again.

"My dad was a fire elemental, so I experienced a lot of discrimination -- from teachers and the other kids in the neighborhood. I know what it's like to be the underdog. Oh, this is a shortcut I learned by accident," Larry remarks before he faces forward to guide the car onto the sidewalk where he proceeds to speed down a pedestrian-filled alley lined with café's, bookstores, clothing shops, and that sort of thing. Folks out for a pleasant evening's stroll are surprised to discover the sudden appearance of Larry and his jalopy of death and have to jump out of his way to avoid being run over.

"Is this safe?" the cowardly-camera-cur (I like the ring of that, don't you?) asks sheepishly.

This, of course, causes Larry to turn around to address the camera again. "It's a dangerous job. I know that one of these days

will be my last, but if I can just save one little Trollkin, Hobbling, or sexy Sm©rk™ette before I go, then it will be all worthwhile.”

Larry doesn't pause to ponder the irony of his statement, and rather instead takes a left at the end of the shopping plaza, goes down a short pothole filled side street, and then swerves sharply to cut onto and through the grass that forms an elementary school's play yard. The playground is surprisingly full at this time of night and the children run in all directions as they dive out of the way of the speeding vehicle. But this doesn't deter Larry. For, after he's made it safely across the field one time without hitting any of the innocent children at play, he decides the best course of action would be to do a few donuts (because you've got to work a donut joke into a cop scene somewhere), turn around, and cross the playground once again, giving it all another go.

Barreling down on a small Elvin lad, Larry carefully corrects his course to keep the “Little Bugger” in his sites. And only a fraction of a second before he is going to run over the poor Elf does Larry swing his car around sideways so that it comes skidding to a halt right in front of the terrified Elvin boy-child. Don't ask me how Larry does this last maneuver. One minute he's chasing after a “perp” and the next moment the “perp” is crashing into his car like a drunken sailor, a menace to both himself and others. I guess it's just one of those things they teach you at cop driving school. Anyway, seeing as how the kid wasn't expecting a car to materialize from out of nowhere right in front of him, the Elfin lad runs right into the back door. Taking the most of this opportunity -- while the child is still stunned -- Larry reaches out through the car's perpetually open window and grabs the kid by the collar.

“What's your name, punk?”

“Irvin Mosswood,” the frightened Elfling replies.

“If you try to run away, I'm only going to have to tackle you, so stay put,” Larry explains -- sort of reasonable -- as he lets Irvin go. Hopping out of the vehicle through the window (just like they do in those better cop movies), Larry directs Irvin to the rear of the squad car, where he places Irvin's lunch pail on the trunk as he

rummages through the kid's backpack. After not finding what he is looking for or anything of interest in the backpack, Larry turns his attention to the lunch pail. But in truth, this was all merely an elaborate negotiation ploy. Those of you with a keen eye and a sense for kitschy collectables will have already marked the lunchbox for a Targor Series I Lunch Pail, complete with matching thermos. And what's more, it's in nearly mint condition!!!

I know, contain yourself.

"Do you have the promo card that came with this?" comes the zealous voice of Larry Magma, part time police officer, full time collector.

"Yes," a nervous Elfin lad replies.

"Give it," Larry instructs, demands, and/or orders.

After inspecting his prize, Larry rubs his jaw while eyeing the kid. I told you he was a shrewd negotiator. Or maybe he's just stalling for time because the next thing he does is sniff at the tuna fish sandwich that is in the lunch box. And then, of all things, he takes a bite. It's obviously not a very good tuna fish sandwich. Perhaps hoping for something to kill the taste of rotting fish, he unscrews the top of the thermos and more or less repeats the procedure for the dakout noodle soup, which he is soon spitting out onto the grass.

Satisfied that he has searched the child completely and found everything of value, Larry pops the trunk to his patrol car. Inside is all the vice an evil arch-nemesis dark-warlord could ever hope for: cigarettes, booze, fireworks, candy, and on and on.

"What do you want for it?" Larry asks, "for the Targor lunch box?"

"I don't want to trade. I just want my lunchbox," Irvin replies timidly.

But it's probably just a negotiation stance Larry decides as he offers his bestsellers, "Handcuff's? A police scanner with codes?"

By now a crowd of children has gathered around Larry's squad car and one of Irvin's friends suggests, "Get a Golt 45."

“A case of malt liquor, then?” Larry offers as he holds up an ice-cold carton of the stuff, dripping with water just like in your better commercials or inter-story product placements.

“No, the handgun,” the child corrects.

Yeah, that’s what Larry had figured the kid meant. Trades had been much easier before the weapons ban. He could get almost anything he wanted for a genuine police issue service revolver. But no! The Consort had to change all that. He had tried -- he really had -- to get these fifth graders interested in cigarettes and liquor, but they’d rather hang onto their cards, toys, lunchboxes, and other sought after collectables than have a carton of cigarettes! It was getting to the point where it was hardly worth driving recklessly through the schoolyards anymore.

But out of curiosity if nothing else, Irvin has started to rummage around through some of the more tame stuff in Larry’s trunk -- old comic books, action figures, Sp@ce Trek collectibles, even a PTSD Sm©rk™ -- but there is nothing there that the kid would rather have than a genuine first edition Targor lunchbox complete with thermos and collector card.

“Nope,” Irvin says finally. It would appear that he doesn’t want to trade.

“How about a hubcap from a police cruiser? Or a door?” Larry suggests desperately.

“How about a ride?” Irvin counters all of a sudden out of nowhere, “And nothing short, a real ride.”

(Maybe with a car chase or something. Who knows, maybe Larry will arrest somebody or something if we get lucky.)

Larry considers the proposal for a moment. He could lose his job. Well no, he couldn’t really lose his job, but he has to pretend like he could lose his job, or then he really could lose his job. Things like that never really made any sense to him -- or the author for that matter -- but both of them know that’s just the way things work in Rigor Pass. It’s all about appearances. But, whatever.

“It’s a deal!” Larry finally agrees after only a moment more. And then, both of them spit and shake to seal the deal -- nasty custom that.

Without further ado, Larry tosses the lunch pail into his glove box and carefully inserts the promo card into the rear wheel spokes of his police cruiser. Then both of them hop into the car -- Larry in the driver’s seat and Irvin in the passenger’s -- before Larry floors the car blasting away -- and through -- the crowd of kids in blatant disregard for their safety. And just to bring this last point home, Larry circles around again like a shark before aiming his cruiser at center of the cluster of kids -- who for their part dive (giggling, I might add) out of the way to avoid becoming hood ornaments.

“Where should we go, Irvin?” Larry asks as he nonchalantly speeds along. But as he does, the police radio barks in with that ever present -- i.e. ubiquitous -- announcement, “All Cars, calling all cars...”

But Larry only turns off the police radio off as he explains to Irvin, the camera man, whoever in the audience cares, “They don’t mean us.”

I suppose I should mention that as this exchange is taking place, Larry is busy driving like he usually does -- speeding up hills, launching the car blindly over the top of the rise, and through busy intersection. Anyone who has driven through the streets of San Fran-Cisco or seen one of the many cop shows that have taken place in that city over the years knows what I’m talking about -- Larry speeding up a hill, blindly going airborne, landing amid a screech of other cars, and then barreling on in pursuit of truth, justice, and those hard to find collectibles, while the Targor card spins around in his wheel making that satisfying clickity-clickity-clickity sound that some of us remember from our youths.

After clearing the third intersection, Larry remarks rather distractedly, “Maybe we should turn on the siren?”

“That would be cool,” Irvin agrees,

“Well then, there’s the switch,” Larry offers with a pointed finger.

Taking the cue, Irvin flips the switch without delay.

“We make a pretty good team,” Larry has to admit as he rounds another corner and turns the car sideways. The camera-coward can’t help but focus on a light pole that is rapidly approaching his side of the car -- poised for impact. But there is no need for concern. Larry is an expert driver and he takes all features of the surrounding terrain into account whilst driving. As such, it should be no surprise to any when he utilizes the rigidity of the pole in bringing the vehicle to a full and complete stop in the most expeditious manner possible. That the camera lens cracks from the impact or that the cur behind the lens might have nightmares about this incident for years to come is of no concern to us... or anyone.

Anyway, the light pole is the locale of the next set scene, and as the camera man recovers, three lovely -- if scantily clad -- Pixies come fluttering down around Larry’s squad car. In case it isn’t obvious, they represent the “working girls” that Sergeant Crush’em referred to during his briefing.

“Hi-ya, Larry. Long time no see,” one of the Pixies remarks seductively as she strokes his face with obvious familiarity.

“I see you brought us some company,” another squeals with delight as she salaciously strokes Irvin’s face.

While a third coyly insists, as she lovingly caresses the lucky camera-dude, “It’s gonna cost ya extra if you want to take pictures,”

“Say I’m short a few, could you lend me a gold or two,” Larry replies evenly as he lets his request drawl off into nothing.

“Sure you wouldn’t rather take it out in trade?” the first Pixie asks hopefully as her hands become more adventurous in their explorations.

This last line, of course, is just a set-up for Irvin to reply quite naively, “What have you got?” to trade, that is.

But before this can go any further, Larry reaches into Nicki's garter belt and takes out the two gold pieces he was referring to earlier -- for her own protection, or something like that.

"Hey!" Nicki squeals. "Copping a feel is one thing, but taking my hard earned gold is another!"

Of course, Larry just ignores her. Come to think of it, he's probably the best character I know of in fantasy fiction for ignoring things. Like right now he's ignoring the fact that Noreen is giving Irvin her number so he can call her later. And for that matter, he is also ignoring the camera-cad who is even now zooming in for a close up as Larry tells Nicki, "They're bringing in a Pegasus unit for aerial support. You might want to lay low for a while."

And then, when it is time to leave and he backs up, he manages to ignore the fact that he's run into a fire hydrant. He even manages to ignore the geyser of water launching into the air.

But, as the line of fifty squad cars go streaming by into the night -- sirens blaring and lights flashing -- this is something that even Larry cannot ignore.

After the trail of cars has long since screamed by, Larry turns to face the camera-caddy, smiles for the close-up, and says, "I know a short cut," before he speeds off in the opposite direction.

I say, it is time to let the games begin!

14

Joy Ride -- Rigor Pass

Larry drove with the reckless disregard for those around him that in only one chapter had become his trademark™. (Patent Pending).

For his own part, Larry reasoned reckless driving was the price to be paid for police protection. And thus, he saw it as both necessary -- and in keeping with the oath he had sworn to protect others -- as he swerved onto the sidewalk, went the wrong way down a one way street, ran through a half dozen red lights without

slowing down, and finally -- upon reaching his destination -- slammed into a dumpster that someone had conveniently placed in front of the video arcade, bringing his vehicle to a full and complete stop as expeditiously as possible.

It was only then that Larry remembered he had a siren. Feeling that it was only right and proper, he chose that moment to turn it back on. Needless to say, the flashing lights and surreal wailing sort of threw both Irvin -- the Elfin boy child -- and the cowardly cur of a camera-guy off balance as they sought to follow Larry's running form into the video arcade.

But not to worry, they quickly caught up with Larry as he only had a short way to run before...

He waited for his turn in front of the token-change vending machine...

Quickly, exchanged the gold he had gotten from Nicki for some gaming tokens...

Looked around frantically...

And then (Finally!), Larry found the gaming-machine he was searching for: Joy Ride – Rigor Pass.

Sadly for the good folds at Quantum Computing (a paying sponsor, for those of you into that full disclosure sort of thing), the line for Joy Ride – Rigor Pass wasn't very long. So being the patient sort of guy that he is, Larry put his token on the machine to indicate that he was next, after the six others who were already in line in front of him; and then, he waited... patiently.

Which is to say, he waited.

Then, he waited some more.

And then, he waited just a little bit more.

But then, Larry wasn't really such a patient sort of guy. Anyone who knew him in the least could have told you that he wasn't really big on waiting. In fact, they probably would have told you that Larry Magma was more of an action sort of guy, you know, a spur of the moment, follow the wisps of the air type of guy, who got in, got out, and somewhere in-between got the job done, and then (and only then) after it was all over he might (just

might) call for reinforcements or wait for back-up -- mainly so somebody else could take care of all that boring paperwork stuff. That was basically the sort of guy Larry Magma was. So in other words, pretty much the moment Irvin and that pesky camera-curl-guy finally caught up with him, Larry had already waited, what? A good ten? Fifteen? Twenty seconds? And that just might have been a personal record for Larry, so feeling sort of stoked about his new PB-P -- you guessed it, Personal Best for Patience -- Larry felt it was only right that he waited some more -- maybe a second or two. But then he had really waited long enough, and it was time for the plot to move forward.

So without further delay, Larry ejected the kid (probably a baby goat, I'm thinking) who had been playing Joy Ride – Rigor Pass -- the new hit arcade gaming sensation that is taking the Realms by storm -- out of the gaming booth.

On-screen, a yellow mustang drifted to a halt. Half a dozen digital policemen appeared and began hitting the vehicle (and/or it's driver) with their blue Billy clubs (hence the previous goat reference, and please, don't expect me to point out all these nuances for you in the future, you're going to have to catch them on your own from now on).

Anyway, with no one at the controls, the screen began to blink, then flash, and then a game over graphic of a criminal behind bars appeared as the sound system let out a garbled, 'Crime never pays! Game over.'

Clearly, it was now Larry's turn. Sitting down at the console, Larry inserted his token(s), selected the Rigor Pass course (expert setting), and highlighted the law enforcement play option. A blue and white police car appeared on-screen as a count down began:

Three...

Two...

One...

It was a standard three, two, one countdown, and it lasted like, what? Five seconds! Larry was going crazy. I mean, there

was no time to loose! Criminals were on the loose! Who did those folks at Quantum Computing think they were? (You know, except for the most brilliant game designers, like, ever!)

Anyhow, when the screen flashed 'Start', Larry floored the accelerator. Well, actually he'd been pumping the accelerator the entire time, but it didn't do anything until the end of the countdown -- but then, you probably already knew that. But what you probably didn't know is that instead of going straight down the main drag, Larry took an immediate left, turning into a shopping mall, and drove right down the pedestrian walkway -- like we haven't seen that before (and like recently). But you get used to this sort of needless repetition if you're into computer games. Anyhow, this time around Larry slalomed back and forth hitting the pagoda displays on the either side of the aisle. Being an expert at this sort of thing, Larry hit all fifteen of the kiosks and got a thirty second play bonus for his efforts. (Tell me you knew about that one.) But that's just the start.

Larry then drove up the escalator (yes, in his car), did a u-turn around the cell phone venders (annoying hucksters that they are), and then went right back down as he headed towards the elevators. Here Larry got lucky, because his timing was spot-on, and he got to the elevators just as they were opening. Taking it up to the third floor, heading through a little known short cut through women's wear, Larry crashed into the waiting jewelry counter, but rather than causing the mess you might expect, it opened up a fiendishly obscure Easter-Egg -- brought to you exclusively by Dragon Bound Publishing and Quantum Computing. (It's a secret weapons screen enabler. And, oh, by the way, you're welcome.)

Suddenly, the kids who had been grumbling about how it wasn't fair that Larry hadn't waited his turn were now mesmerized -- and taking mental notes. They hadn't known about this secret cache of weapons. But rather than listen to their accolades of praise or pausing to answer their ill-timed questions, Larry was intent on the task at hand and quickly scrolled through all the available options screens. He would have liked to select the

machine guns. I mean, you can see how that would be nice, but a gun -- virtual or otherwise -- wouldn't work in modern day Rigor Pass, not with its new weapons banning Consort, nor would the rocket launchers, the laser beams, or handy-dandy crowd-control tactical nukes -- which happen to be my personal favorite. So not really having any other options, it didn't take Larry long to settle on caltrops, tire blow out strips, and oil. True, it wasn't much, but what are you going to do? If you play Joy Ride – Rigor Pass in Rigor Pass, they're the only options you've got. And don't write me any nasty letters. I'm not the one who made up the Weapons Ban.

(Whatever. Just because I get a letter doesn't mean I have to publish it.)

Having geared-up, Larry backed out of the jewelry department and creamed a makeup display full-on -- quite by accident I assure you. But it was a lucky break as his car started to flash pink. He'd be getting double points for the next thirty seconds! Ka-ching!

Better make the most of it, Larry must have been thinking as he drove back into the mall proper. I mean, Larry was used to the nuances of police work, the collateral damage, the unseen significance of the smallest detail or clue, but civilians didn't typically understand the urgency of police work. I mean, get this: throughout the mall, the shoppers were going about their merry little business just like always, totally unconcerned about the maniacal police officer running amuck. Who knows? Maybe someone was releasing a little too much Soma into the ventilating system.

Eh, whatever the case, on the way out the door Larry clipped an elderly couple who never even knew what hit them. Larry hated to do it, of course. As a law enforcement officer they would cost him a negative hundred thousand points, each -- at double points no less!!! But for the pair he got thirty seconds of bonus

time and gearing up at the jewelry counter had taken longer than he had allotted for. From there, it was a simple matter of crashing through those big glass doors at the mall's entrance and Larry was home free. He didn't even bother to slow down or wonder at the efficiency of a work crew that could rebuild an entire storefront in less than fifteen seconds merely because crashing through something that's already been destroyed isn't that much fun.

Larry, of course, wasn't thinking about player satisfaction -- that was the job of those creative computer code-writing gurus at Quantum Computing. Rather, what Larry was doing was racing down the street, crashing into one of those pesky slow moving motorcycles, before speeding through a gas station while refilling his tanks on the way -- which thankfully wasn't done in real time. I don't think Larry would have been able to handle it.

Once past the gas station and back on the main road leading into town, Larry saw a line of prostitutes, K'fr dealers, and moneylenders, so he carefully barreled through the lot of them, circling around twice to pick off stragglers. The entire maneuver took longer than Larry anticipated, but he was back in positive points territory now, and he felt better. He even went through Manna-King's drive-thru and dropped off one of his caltrops -- just for kicks, not to mention the bonus points he'd get for the rest of the game every time a customer got stuck in line.

Points positive, plenty of time on the clock, and fully geared for play: it was only then that Larry looked at the radar screen and turned on his police scanner. Unsurprisingly, the display read:

Wanted - Dead or Alive
Naked Minataur
Presumed Armed and Dangerous
Driving a Stolen Police Cruiser

After consulting his radar screen, Larry quickly realized he was heading the wrong way. So, he did another u-turn (across three lanes of traffic in the process), while dropping four more

caltrops across the pavement. No one was going to be getting into -- or more importantly, getting out of -- Rigor Pass on this road until the game was over.

It would be about here that Larry noticed that one of those car transport trucks -- of the kind so often used as ramps in these here video games -- was parked by the side of the road just two blocks ahead. So, Larry floored his vehicle. And he was going far in excess of 200mph when he hit the ramp. Don't ask me how he did it, but Larry somehow managed to steer while in the air and guided his vehicle to a nice soft landing on a nearby building where he just so happened to use a stairwell's slanted roof as a ramp to jump to the next building, and then the next, and the next, and the next. In fact, Larry did this multiple times in succession; and each time he did, a big number flashed on the screen. '1000' the first time, then '2000', '4000', '8000', '16000', '32000', and '64000', until it finally max'ed out at '128,000 +5s' -- that +5s is the important thing to note. Whatever your points, when the timer runs out, it's game over. So really, given the choice, always go for seconds over points. Anyhow, although Larry would have been quite happy to continue this jumping routine for another dozen iterations before he ran out of buildings at the edge of Rigor Pass proper, his radar screen indicated that he was finally where he needed to be. So taking another one of those shortcuts, he swerved off the rooftop and dropped three stories to the pavement below -- you need not wonder very hard why Larry's car looked like total crap. He took this sort of shortcut whenever he could.

Anyway, once on the ground, Larry noticed another police cruiser (which appeared to look amazingly like his own -- battered, beaten, and abused) barreling down the road in his direction piloted by a red-eyed K'fr-ed up Minataur out for blood (a.k.a. Buddy).

Now, neither player had bothered to turn on their sirens -- an idiosyncrasy of Larry's that he had been written up for on numerous occasions. And so, both of them were being followed by a string of fifty or so computer controlled squad cars -- each of

whom did have their sirens blaring. Or another way of looking at it is that as far as the game was concerned, Larry had turned renegade -- pretty much way back when he had clipped that elderly couple.

Obviously, it was time for the showdown. But rather than flooring it like you -- or at least, I -- would have expected, Larry let his car idle, while the police cars chasing him caught up -- and not uncoincidentally blocked the roadway behind him with an impenetrable mish-mash of squad cars. With Billy clubs drawn, the officers got out of their cars. Larry waited (Patiently? Probably not) as his fellow police officers approached. And then, at the very last minute, after Buddy had driven through the last intersection, past his last turn-off, and was committed to his course, Larry gunned the motor, leaving the milling mob of policemen behind him to waive their Billy clubs impotently in the air.

Once again, Larry and Buddy raced towards each other. There was nothing but open road between them, nothing but empty pavement. But like I said, behind Larry, the road was blocked by a tangle of police cruisers; while behind Buddy, a line of police cars stretched as far as the eye could see (i.e. off the screen). As they sped towards one another, Larry felt more and more certain that the Minataur in his sights was done for.

But not yet, not so quickly, Buddy still had a trick -- or two, or three -- up his sleeve.

Doing what any K'fr ridden Minataur with access to an AK-47/5889x would do, Buddy shot out the front glass of his patrol car and then aimed his weapon at Larry. As I may have mentioned in passing, the AK-47-5889x comes with a traditional slug weapon, a high beam energy weapon, and a pair of twin mounted rocket launchers. It would be the latter -- the twin mounted rocket launchers -- which Buddy felt the situation called for and as such fired off two -- count them, two -- twin volleys of heat guided, rocket powered, explosive mayhem.

The missiles scorched towards Larry as the game screen was filled with the fiery flame of their afterburners. And then (believe it or not), in an unprecedented move, realizing he had been outplayed, Larry hit the panic button and jumped out of the video game booth as quickly as humanely possible -- or rather as in Larry's particular case, as inhumanely as possible, which being a Half-Elemental was pretty darn quick.

Of course, being a panic button, Larry's remaining caltrops, tire blow out strips, and oil-slick canisters spread across the roadway, but this is probably just a minor detail compared with the fact that the real-life video game console in the video game store promptly exploded and burst into flames. (Now that's realistic game play!)

Later, out in front of the video arcade, smoke billowing from the storefront's broken windows, a crowd of players recalled highlights from what was arguably the most exciting game they had ever witnessed -- like ever.

"That was so cool."

"When do you think they'll get the game fixed?"

"I wonder what weapons are available in the outer vortexes?"

And so on.

But for his part, Larry was nowhere to be seen. And for that matter, neither were Irvin nor that belligerent cur of a camera-caddy, both of whom who'd had front row seats as they leaned on the back-glass of the video game and watched and/or filmed the action.

"When the game exploded that guy just disappeared."

"Where do you think he went?" asked the voice of a final kid -- the aforementioned goat boy, I think.

It's a good question. One you may wish to ask yourself -- again.

Where?

Yes, indeed. Where?

15

Where? Here. That's Where!

Larry bailed from his police cruiser, hitting the pavement just as the four heat-guided antitank squad-car-destroying missiles slammed into his vehicle. The explosion launched the vehicle high -- and I mean, high -- into the air.

"It's been through worse," Larry whispered stoically to himself in the best of hard-guy movie tradition.

"That's pretty bad," the chatty character behind the camera dared to counter, while, "Wow!" was all Irvin could manage.

As for Buddy -- the K'fr crazed, AK-47-5889x toting star of stage and screen -- didn't even take his foot off of the accelerator as he crashed through the smoking remains of what had once been Larry's car. Though, he did switch to machine gun fire. And I have to admit, the ricocheting bullets did sort of spice things up.

Needless to say, Larry had no time to sit back and watch the fireworks. Without missing a beat, he snatched up Irvin in one arm and the slightly overweight camera-jockey in the other. And right before the maniacal Minataur was about to run the three of them over, he dived through a glass storefront.

Glad not to be road kill (but still recovering from the fall), none of them could see it when all four of the tires on Buddy's car popped at once. But they sure could hear it. And that sweet sound was quickly followed by the satisfying crumple of metal as Buddy's car plowed straight into the side of a brick building.

Instinctively, Larry was up on his feet, brushing broken glass off his uniform, and running. He caught up with the Minataur just as Buddy was getting out of the trashed police cruiser with his AK-47/5889x in hand.

Larry didn't stop to consider why Buddy had an AK-47/5889x in the Realms. Instead, he grabbed hold of the gun's barrel -- pointing the weapon away from himself -- while simultaneously kicking Buddy in the face.

An Elemental's punch -- or kick, even a half breed's -- is nothing to sneeze at. The force of the blow caused Buddy to lose his grip on the weapon -- and with that the gun vanished and disappeared from the Realms.

But Buddy wasn't finished yet. He wasn't ready to lay down and die. Though Larry's attack had momentarily stunned him, he had now recovered and swung hard, connecting with Larry's face.

Larry returned the favor.

As did Buddy...

As did Larry...

And so on...

And so forth...

In endless repetition...

Ad nauseam...

Which is how you or I would feel if either a Minataur or an Elemental -- even a half breed -- was slamming their fists repeatedly into your face, gullet, and/or backside.

But, Larry didn't feel the blows -- his father was made of molten iron. And Buddy didn't feel the blows -- he had been on a three day K'fr spree and at this point only Gra'gl knew what demon was riding his soul and calling the shots.

Even so, they slugged it out.

Because that's... what they did, I suppose.

Whatever the reason, neither of the combatants noticed as they were slowly surrounded by a dozen police officers -- Billy clubs drawn. And both of them quickly fell into blissful slumber when the crowd-control sleep-gas canisters burst into smoke at their feet.

After the knock-out smoke had cleared, Sergeant Crush'em could be seen looking over the pair of sleeping beauties. He shook his head as he tabulated the cost of the two totally destroyed police cruisers in his head. Finally, the Sergeant remarked sourly, "It sure is a shame Hank got sick today."

“Yeah, Sarge. It’s a real shame,” the deputy next to him agreed. “Maybe next time. Maybe next time.”

16 #
On a Pixie’s Wings

As is the nature of these things, a crowd quickly formed to watch the spectacle of a street packed with police officers trying to deal with two cruisers burning in flames. In no time, news teams were dispatched to record the events. And with them, even more police officers arrived to set up barricades and keep the ever growing crowd in check.

Nellie easily blended into the crowd along with the other spectators. She watched in pain as they shoved Buddy into the back of a paddy wagon. Nellie couldn’t explain why, but she knew she was bound to Buddy. With every passing moment, she could feel the pull on her heartstrings grow ever stronger...

And then, when the sleeping gas wore off -- as it always does in these things -- Nellie watched as Buddy decked an Ogre and tried to run down the street in all his naked glory. He would have made it too... almost, sort of.

He knocked over two more Ogres and hit a third as the crowd cheered him on. But soon, he was surrounded again. And then it was over when a dozen Trolls tackled him -- like, all at once. They tied him up, hit him with a stun baton, and threw him -- still struggling -- back into the paddy wagon. And all the while, the crowd continued to jeer.

After Nellie had witnessed Buddy’s recapture, after she had felt her heart surge with the hope of his escape, there was no further doubt in her mind. The little Pixie realized she loved Buddy. And furthermore, now she knew exactly why. It was his passion, his will, his refusal to surrender even in the face of overwhelming odds. He was special. He was crazy. He was out of control. It didn’t make any sense. But then, love so seldom

does -- make any sense, that is. And even though she'd only known him for a few hours, well, sometimes that's just the way love was. One moment, you're leaving behind a pair of new Urban Dungeon running shoes as manufactured by Nifty for one guy. And the next, you're traipsing across the Seven Realms in the horns of another on some wild Gra'gl forsaken quest.

And with that sort of unfocused narrative overcall echoing through her head, Nellie suddenly knew it was time for her to finally get this quest thing off the ground and underway.

But oddly, saving the Realms and running off on some wild quest for The Dragon and his Celaphopod lackey was not the motivation behind Nellie's next course of action. More important than any adventure was the imperative of saving Buddy's life.

Possession of K'fr, weapons smuggling, firing at a police officer, attempted murder, and the violation of nearly every traffic law on the books: the Seven Realms may have changed a lot in the last few months since Ruby became Consort, but it hadn't changed that much. The Dragon was a vindictive sort of creature -- everyone knew that. His brand of justice was short, sweet, and brutally effective.

And because of that, there was only one person in all the vortexes who could help Buddy, now -- Ruby Firehaven, the new Consort to The Dragon.

No one noticed as Nellie left the crowd or as she quietly flew away into the night sky. Philosophers like to talk about the wings of butterflies. But just between you and me, the wings of Pixies are so much more influential, as they are guided by the passions of the heart.

End Book I